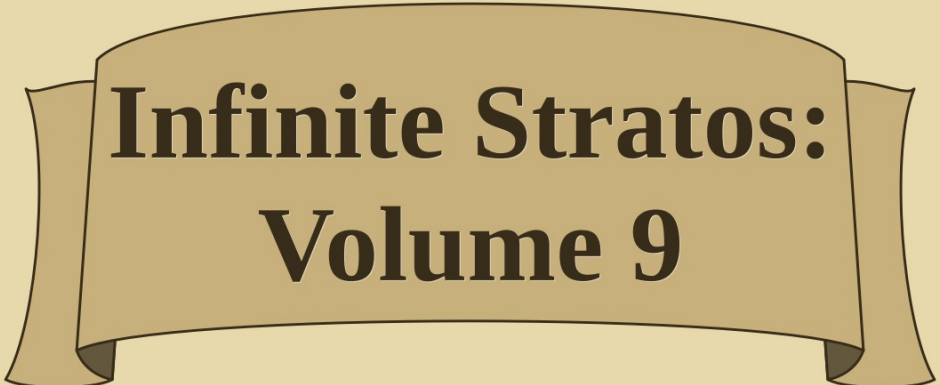




Infinite Stratos: Volume 9

Izuru Yumizuru

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

9

INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO

INFINITE STRATORS IS9

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO





Aikawa: "Eek! Ichika, you're such a pervert!"

Ling: "So it comes to this, Cecilia!"

Cecilia: "I always knew this would happen, Ling!"

Laura: "Right wing, fan out! Left, follow me!"

Chart: "I won't let you do that, Laura!"

Kanzashi: "I won't let myself lose!"

Honda: "Not bad, Kanzashi! But not enough to beat me!"

"GIVE ME THAT HEADBAAAAND!"



Laura: *“Verpiss dich!*

*You make me dress up like this,
and then disqualify me?!*

I'll blow you all away!”



The identification tag on the neck incorporates a medical monitor which can be used to track everything from vital signs to location.

The most common variety of student IS suit. While its appearance is similar to an old-style school swimsuit, a range of manufacturers compete to offer the utmost in both functionality and comfort while adhering to school regulations. The holes in the crotch exist to both disperse stress from the areas stretched hardest in the swimsuits which served as the model, and provide added ventilation.

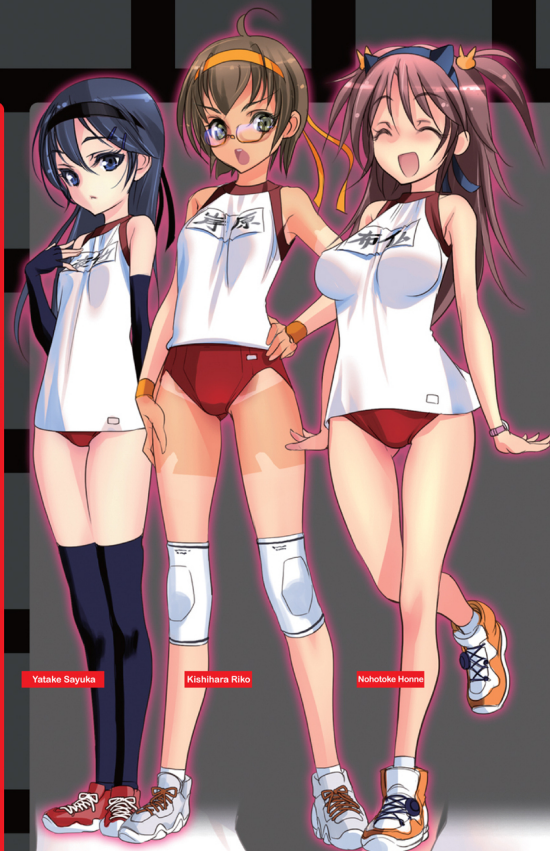
Pressing a switch concealed in the tags of the protective legwear runs an electrical current through a silicon-based compound in the sealing rings, causing it to adhere to the skin.



IS ACADEMY GYM SUIT



The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos



Yatake Sayuka

Kishihara Riko

Nohotake Honne

IS Academy's gym uniform top is a sleeveless shirt with a crew neck. The accent color around the collar is carmine for first years, yellow for second years, and moss green for third years. The bottoms mark an early return, in the newly female-dominated society after the invention of the IS, to women's preference for the functionality and stark aesthetic appeal of bloomers after a period of disuse driven by politically-correct thinking at the beginning of the century; these are red for all school years.

| Athletic Support Bloomers

Typically used by members of varsity and intramural teams. Tight, taut fabric supports the muscles, while the sheer cut helps vent heat.

| Classic Bloomers

A conservative cut helps keep the lower body warm, while soft, elastic fabric ensures suitability for athletics. While the outward look is nostalgic, use of the newest textiles has improved performance; however, the requirement for periodic adjustment has yet to be solved.

Tina HAMILTON Right



Left Kaoruko MAYUZUMI





Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS.
Personal IS: Byakushiki



Shinonono Houki

Ichika's childhood friend.
Personal IS: Akatsubaki



Cecilia Alcott

The British National Cadet.
Personal IS: Blue Tears



Huang Lingyin

The Chinese National Cadet.
Personal IS: Shenlong



Charles Dunois

The French National Cadet.

Personal IS: Rafale Revive Custom II



Laura Bodewig

The German National Cadet.

Personal IS: Schwarzer Regen



Tatenashi Sarashiki

IS Academy Student Council President.

Personal IS: Mysterious Lady



Kanzashi Sarashiki

Japanese National Cadet.

Personal IS: Uchigane Nishiki

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A Maiden's Secrets are Top Secret

Epilogue *Like a Lover, Like a Virgin!*
To Call as if In Love,
to Answer as if In Love



Chapter N: Knockin' On You & You

“Open wide.”

The scene: IS Academy's school hospital. There, Ichika was caring for Tatenashi during her long stay.

“C'mon, I can at least feed myself.”

Tatenashi's—Katana, to use her real name—lips curled into a mild scowl, but at the same time, her cheeks began to flush.

“Say ‘ahh.’”

“Ahh...”

Something about seeing Ichika, normally so indecisive, taking the initiative made her smile. As had become routine, he'd brought a handmade boxed lunch, with tater tots, bacon-wrapped asparagus, an English muffin, and a salad. After lunch, there was orange sherbet for dessert. In other words, Tatenashi's favorites. Ichika grinning friendly; Tatenashi in joyful embarrassment. And a line of eavesdropping shadows lurking just outside the window...

“What's with that?” Ling asked, her eyes lifeless.

“I can't believe it! Are... Are they a couple? Ahhh...” beseeched Cecilia. Her head was swimming, and her face was a ghastly pale shade.

Charlotte watched with a serious look on her face. She wasn't exactly happy about what was going on, but remembering all the times she'd lucked into situations a little more special than Ichika had meant them to be, she was willing to accept that this was like that too.

“I... I can't...”

Whoosh! Two shadows snapped to attention.

“I can't just sit here watching this!” And those were Houki and Laura. One gripped her katana, the other her combat knife.

“Stop...” Kanzashi stuck up a palm to hold them back.

“What are you doing?!”

“Are you just sticking up for her because she's your sister?!”

Turning away from the angry Houki and Laura, Kanzashi pulled open the window.

“Pardon me.”

Both Ichika and Tatenashi were startled by the sudden intrusion. Not least because they were on the third floor and you'd need an IS to be standing outside the window.

“K-Kanzashi?! How long have you been there?!” Ichika, caught completely by surprise, shifted nervously.

“Kanzashi?! W-What are you doing?!” Just like Ichika, Tatenashi was caught off guard and scrambled to recover.

“Are you two together?”

“What do you mean... Together?”

“In a relationship.”

“.....?!”

Ichika and Tatenashi quickly looked at each other, shocked. Their faces reddening, they began to make excuses.

“It’s not like that! It’s just, she’s hurt, so I came to check up on her, and— Gah!” He cut off as Tatenashi dug an elbow into him.

“...Mm.”

Tatenashi angrily folded her arms, her cheeks puffing up. Looking at their reactions, it was obviously just another one of the misunderstandings that sprung up around Ichika.

It looked like she had something more to say about that, though.

Meaning, Tatenashi was probably into him. Into Ichika. As a boy.

“I figured...” Turning around, Kanzashi beckoned the five, floating in their IS, closer. “Ichika said they’re not together.”

Hearing that, they piled into the room.

“Is that true, Ichika?!”

“You’d better not be lying!”

“I... I believe you, I think...”

“You’d better be telling the truth!”

“Explain yourself, then!”

Ichika was at a loss as to how to deal with the intrusion. Sighing, he spoke up, trying to clarify things. “I mean, I do enjoy being with Tatenashi.”

“**Wha—**” the five gasped in unison.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Ling glared at him, a tear welling up in her eye.

“Well, I mean. She’s got a nice figure,” Ichika responded.

“Ugh!” (Ling.)

“She’s not domineering.”

“Ugh!!” (Cecilia.)

“But she knows what she wants and she’s not afraid to ask for it.”

“Ugh!!!” (Charlotte.)

“Without ever getting violent.”

“Ugh!!!!” (Houki.)

“And I don’t have to worry about her sneaking into my room at night.”

“Ugh!!!!!” (Laura.)

“Oh, and she always has a smile on her face.”

“That hurt more than I expected,” muttered Kanzashi.

“But I think you’re all of those things too!”

“HOW DOES THAT EVEN FOLLOW?!”

The angry yells echoed through the halls of the hospital tower.



“I can’t believe he said that...”

Two days later, Tatenashi’s wounds had finally healed. But the IS Mysterious Lady still wasn’t fully repaired, and that cast a shadow over Tatenashi.

I need to give it a full overhaul before too much damage builds up. But if she was going to do that, she’d have to go to Russia. And it would probably take around a week.

“And I wouldn’t be able to see Ichika the whole time...”

Surprised at the words she’d just whispered, Tatenashi tried to take them back. *Jeez, what am I saying? It doesn’t matter if I don’t see him*—She couldn’t even finish the sentence without her heart aching.

No. She wanted to be with him. Even right then. Every second of the day. She shook her head back and forth, as if trying to fan away the heat building in her cheeks. *No way. It’s not like that. I can’t be...*

“Tatenashi, can I come in?”

Her heart pounded. She wasn’t expecting a knock on her door. Ichika hadn’t planned on coming today. While she cast about in her mind for how to react, the door suddenly opened.

“Pardon me.”

“Gah!”

Bonk! A box of tissues, thrown by Tatenashi, bounced off Ichika’s head.

“What are you doing?!”

“I could say the same thing!” She glared at Ichika. “You don’t just walk into a girl’s room! Even you should know that!”

“C’mon, I know *you* well enough that it isn’t a big deal.”

Tatenashi’s breath caught. Ichika may not have been thinking that hard about what he said, but she definitely was now. *That emphasis on you—Me... Do we have something special? Does he not think of the other girls the same way?* As she thought that, she felt her cheeks flush a bright red. *Jeez... My heart’s pounding now...* There was a bittersweet ache in her chest. Tatenashi was realizing that no matter how much she might insist otherwise, in some ways, she was just a girl.

This is no fair... Pressing her hands to her chest to hold back her throbbing heart, she took a deep breath, then turned to face Ichika again.

“A-And what brings you here today, Orimura Ichika?” Tatenashi cleared her throat, trying to act like everything was normal, only to be answered with a laugh.

“Ahahah. What’s gotten into you? You’re really weird today,

Tatenashi.”

“I am not! I’m completely normal. See? I’m even all healed!”

She yanked up the hem of her blouse, exposing her stomach. Her pull was so forceful that the light pink of her bra peeked out as well.



“Whoa! What the heck are you doing?!”

“You said I was weird, didn’t you?!”

“Okay, okay! I get it! Just pull it back down! That has to be cold!”

Tatenashi got more and more frustrated by his refusal to look straight at her.

“See? I’m all back to normal! C’mon! Look!”

“I saw, I saw!”

As embarrassed as Ichika was, Tatenashi kept pressing, “Oh really. Well, you should feel to make sure too.”

“Whaa?” Ichika was dumbfounded. Tatenashi continued to flaunt her slender waist.

“Touch and make sure it’s really healed. That way you can be sure there’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Ehh?”

It was only the suspicious look on Ichika’s face that brought her back to reality. *What am I doing?! I mean, it’s true that between the healing nanomachines, the stem cell therapy, and the adhesive membrane, my wounds are healed over, but...*

He’d be touching her. Touching her body. Her sensitive skin. With his big, strong hands. Ichika would.

Tatenashi’s face went red to the tips of her ears, and she began to say, “Actually, wait, you’re ri—”

Before she could finish, Ichika’s fingertips brushed over her skin.

“Ah!”

“Wow, I can’t even tell you were hurt. This is amazing...”

Poke, poke.

“Ichika...?”

Poke, poke.

“Hmm. Huh. Wow, really?”

Ichika was lost in his own world, a serious look on his face as he alternately prodded and stroked Tatenashi’s stomach. *Ahh... Ahh, nooooo... Anymore and... Ahhhh!* She could feel his eyes, his touch, his warmth probing her as if she were completely naked. Just as she was about to go over the edge, they were interrupted by a brusque bark.

“What the hell are you two doing?!”

“Huh?!”

“Stop that! It’s against the rules!”

Chifuyu and Maya had entered the room, hoping to check up on Tatenashi, IS Academy’s strongest student and student council president, a pivotal point in its defense, and a key factor in its strength. In other words, doing their duty as teachers.

“N-N-N-Nothing! Ahahaha!” Tatenashi let her blouse drop back down while slapping Ichika’s hand away.

“Ehh?” Not understanding the sudden rebuke, Ichika looked up in

confusion, only to be met with a glare.

“...What?”

“Nothing, just...”

“Good, then.” Chifuyu was trying to act as cool and collected as always, but Tatenashi could see in her eyes how close to snapping she was.

“Sarashiki.”

“What?”

“What happened to your fan?”

That was a bit of a sore point. But Tatenashi was able to calmly pull it out and snap it open.

“‘Romance,’ huh.”

Realizing she’d pulled out the wrong fan, she panicked. “W-Wrong one! I meant this one!”

She snapped open another, reading ‘Invincible.’

“Sarashiki.”

“Yes?”

“Are you falling for him?”

The fan creaked as Tatenashi subconsciously squeezed it.

“W-Where on Earth did you get that idea from?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

“Of course not! See, I’m—” As she reached for another fan, her hand slipped, and dozens came pouring out onto the floor. “Ahaha, whoopsie.”

Tatenashi bent down to pick up the fans. As she did, Ichika reached out his hand.

“Let me help.”

“I-I’m fine...”

“C’m on.”

Their hands brushed together.

“.....?!”

Startled, Tatenashi pulled hers back. Ichika watched curiously. She turned away, while holding her right hand that brushed against him with her left. *No... No, I can’t...*

She was realizing that Ichika... Was a potential partner. Someone she could love.

Ugh, I’m such an idiot! If I hadn’t pushed it further than I had to— Than she had to? No. She’d wanted even more. *Even I’m realizing...* She couldn’t let it go any further. She needed to put some distance between them before she lost herself. The name “Tatenashi” wasn’t that light of a load to carry, and the position of head of the Sarashiki family was something she couldn’t just step down from.

Chifuyu and Maya didn’t miss the pained expression which flitted across her face.

The girl's fallen for him.

Head-over-heels.

Ichika, oblivious to the thoughts of the women around him, finished picking up the fans and held them out to Tatenashi.

“Here you go, Tatenashi.”

She could barely stand the feelings his happy innocence stirred up in her.

“Anyway, that’s enough for today. Ichika, could you finish the things for the student council?”

“Of course. I’m almost done already.”

He was a diligent worker, too. No— She was getting carried away again.

“Excellent. Take good care of Kanzashi.”

“Wait, shouldn’t I be taking care of you right now?”

Taking care of her right now...

Taking care of her...

Of her...

“.....!!!”

Tatenashi, her face so red it seemed like she was about to blow steam from her ears, fled the room.

“Huh...?” Ichika tilted his head to the side in dumbfounded confusion.

“Just great. My brother’s a natural-born gigolo.”

Still crouched down on the floor, Ichika’s butt was just on the right level for a good hard kick from Chifuyu.



Later that night, Tatenashi was soaking in the bath alone, thinking. *What do I do, what do I do?*

She had fallen for Ichika. She couldn’t stop thinking about him. She knew it was the one thing forbidden to her, but she still couldn’t help herself.

I need to do something, something to change my mind... Maybe if she pushed Ichika off the student council. No! If I do that, I’ll never see him! So what about finding a reason for him to be stationed outside of the Academy? No, that’d be a bad idea even outside of how I feel. There are too many organizations, too many countries after his Byakushiki.

Then, what?

“If I knew, this would be a lot easier...”

She sunk her mouth under the water and exhaled a strand of bubbles. *Sigh... I thought I was better than this.*

She’d thought she could do anything by herself. For the most part, she *had* done everything by herself. But what she really wanted... What she really wanted was to ask someone to set her free. Free from

this cage of loneliness.

“I told him my name...”

Her real name. Katana. Something she *absolutely* must not tell anyone outside her family.

Well, I-I'll just have to make him part of my family! That was the conclusion she came to. Sarashiki Ichika... Didn't sound bad.

“Tatenashi, dinner's ready.”

“C'mon, Ichika. When are you going to remember? I'm Katana.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, Katana.”

“No fair hugging me while you apologize.”

“Then should I kiss you—”

“You have a nosebleed.”

Eh?! With a sudden splash, Kanzashi nonchalantly sat down in the bath beside her.

“Wh-Wh-Wh...” Surprised by Kanzashi's sudden appearance, Tatenashi sprang to her feet. *What was she doing here?!*

“Were you thinking something dirty?”

“No! I definitely wasn't! What are you doing here?! This is a second-year dorm!”

“I was worried about you.” That was a lie. *I need to keep an eye on my rivals.* Kanzashi imagined herself sticking out her tongue. Sometimes girls in love keep tricks up their sleeves. “Anyway. Sit down.”

“What's gotten into you?” Tatenashi, nonplussed at being ordered around by her little sister, slowly sat down. As she did, Kanzashi stared at the luscious melons dangling from her chest. “Wh-What?”

“Ichika said you have a nice figure, didn't he. Must be nice.”

The last part escaped Tatenashi's notice, though, for just hearing the words again sent Ichika's voice looping over and over through her mind.

“Tatenashi, you've got a nice figure.”

“Well... I guess, maybe...”

“And I want to enjoy every inch of it.”

“Wait, not yet, that's— Mmm!”

“You have a nosebleed again.”

“Whaa?!”

The water between the sisters was stained a faint crimson.



“All right, I've gotta get going.”

It was just after class, and Cecilia was blocking the way to the student council room.

“Could you hold on for a moment, Ichika?”

“Cecilia? What's up?”

Cecilia posed, as usual, with a hand clutched to her chest. It was no surprise that when a magazine ran a photoshoot of British cadets, she was the most popular by far.

"I've begun to feel that I, Cecilia Alcott, should aid my fellow students by joining the student council's executive branch," she flounced. And as usual, Ichika couldn't help but notice her well-proportioned bust.

"Ohh, I see. So, would you like a recommendation?"

Cecilia's eyes glimmered at Ichika's recognition of her efforts.

"Yes! Of course!" After shaking his hand, she smoothly linked arms with him.

"All right, let's go, then. Before anyone else gets any ideas."

"Hey, hold it right there!" a voice echoed through the halls. No one but Ling could have been that energetic.

"Do make it snappy, Ling. We have business to attend to with the student council."

"Hey, c'mon! What're you doing arm-in-arm?!"

"Ah, is it not only natural for a proper lady to claim her *droit du seigneur*?" Cecilia sniffed haughtily while brushing her bangs back. As she did, the scent of roses filled the room.

Ugh... And I thought I was doing good with a peach-blossom perfume... It'd seemed like such a good idea buying it, but if Ichika didn't notice it was pointless. And with Cecilia right up against him, the odds of that were slim. *Ichika, you idiot!*

Just as her hopes began to sink, Ichika suddenly reached out and brushed Ling's hair. "Huh? Rin, you smell nice."

"Eh..."

"Not sure what it is, but... Yeah." Ichika gently cradled one of her pigtails in his hand, and began to sniff. Ling's face flushed a deep red in embarrassment as she stared at the floor.

"I... I just use perfume sometimes, that's all..."

"Wow! I didn't realize you were so grown up!"

Ling smiled gleamingly at Ichika's words, "R-Really? Do you think it works on me?"

"Of course it does! You smell great, and so does Cecilia."

Cecilia, who'd been looking for ways to get back into the conversation, was caught off guard by Ichika's direct mention.

"I-Ichika, you noticed my perfume?" she asked tentatively, with a slight blush.

"Well, all girls like to smell good, right? I've been picking up on that. Cecilia, yours is rose, right? I liked the lavender one you've been using too."

"Well! Perhaps I should use a new perfume every day, and give your nose a varied diet!" Cecilia, fascinated by the idea, held a palm

to her cheek. At the same time, Ling took Ichika's free arm.

"Anyway, Ichika! Can you make more than one recommendation? I'd like to help everyone out too," she giggled while grinning up at him.

Ichika, taking it at face value, smiled back and said, "Well, I'll ask Tatenashi. No guarantees she's gonna go along with it, though."

"Okay! Thanks, Ichika!"

On his other side, Cecilia struggled to hold back an exasperated frown until the joy of her perfume being praised won out. *He truly is growing into the kind of gentleman I prefer. Step one on the path to Ichika O. Alcott!* Her heart soared as she imagined Ichika as the power behind the throne of Alcott and Company.

Back on his other side...

Wow, Ichika. You pay a lot more attention than you let on. I need to start thinking about a path toward being Orimura Rin! She may have seen herself fighting in the Mondo Grosso tournament, but it didn't necessarily have to be as the Chinese representative. Fighting as Japan's representative would be fine too.

A fangy grin.

A palm held against the cheek.

Ichika was flanked by roses with thorns.



"Rejected." Two birds with one blunt, direct stone. Tatenashi's voice was clear and cold.

"Why?!"

"But why?!"

Of course, Ling and Cecilia instinctively argued back as they stood before Tatenashi's desk in the student council meeting room.

"C'mon, I'm trying to help you out here! You should be grateful!"

"I can certainly see why you wouldn't be interested in Ling, but, obviously, I can contribute and shouldn't simply be ignored!"

They each slammed a palm onto her desk.

"What's wrong with you? Did you just come in here to play games with me?"

"Of course not! Not at all!"

They turned back to Tatenashi.

"But why?!"

"We're already full."

Tatenashi pointed at Kanzashi, whose fingertips were racing over a keyboard.

"Sarashiki Kanzashi... Newly-appointed manager of Orimura Ichika I/O," she pantomimed a bow without even looking up.

"Orimura Ichika I/O..."

“Yes. My primary responsibility is scheduling and planning for Orimura Ichika.”

“What kind of terrible pun is that?!” Ling shot back.

“O-rimura *I*-chika... *I/O*... Ahahaha!” Surprisingly, Cecilia enjoyed the wordplay.

“Oh, so Kanzashi’ll be taking care of that now? Great, Miss Casual was so lackadaisical about it that I had no clue what I was supposed to be doing half of the time.” Ichika was blissfully unaware of the implications flying around him.

“Yes... I’m looking forward to working with you.” Kanzashi smiled.

“Grr...” Tatenashi suddenly realized the potential pitfalls of bringing Ichika and Kanzashi closer together.

“Ahh. The tea is wonderful.” Nohotoke Utsuho was pretending not to notice the conversation.

“Whew. The weather today’s almost as good as these snacks.” Miss Casual was happily chowing down.

Suddenly, the snap of a fan opening cut through the confusion. “Very well!” On the fan was written “duel.” “I’d like to announce a Field Day! In one week, the first years will compete for Ichika!” Tatenashi’s voice was clear and sharp, even as her cheeks burned and she tried to avoid making eye contact with Ichika.

The stage was set. Life is short, maidens; find love while you can! Take the object of your affections before he’s taken by another. Reach out your hand and grasp glory! All’s fair in love and war!

Chapter I: Hamster Cluster! Love Rival Warning

“So that’s what’s going on?” Laura asked as she set down the clay she’d been kneading, and looked around the table. It was late at night in the IS Academy first-year dorms. Normally, this was when they’d be enjoying an evening tea time, but today, everyone’s faces were stony.

“The winner is placed in the same class as Ichika, and everyone else is moved to another. And...” Charlotte finished kneading her own lump of clay, and placed it next to Laura’s spiky creation. Together they looked like the king and queen of a chess set. “And the winner also moves in with Ichika.”

A jolt ran up the spine of the cadets gathered at the table.

Living with Ichika. An experience unlike any other. Houki and Charlotte, especially, knew that well.

I could be with him again, like we were...

This time we’ll do couple things!

Hopes of being back in those sweet days. Their quiet reminiscence was shattered by Ling speaking up.

“Anyway! I’m up against you all, and I’m not gonna hold back!”

Cecilia looked up from her tea and intoned calmly, “Are you sure you’d like to say that? We’ll be on foot, not in our IS. Need I remind you of your chances? My champions are simply invincible!”

“What will matter the most are squad tactics. I don’t intend to lose.” Kanzashi was in a rare mood, and her glare was as sharp as a knife.

“Hmph. If it’s tactics you want, you’ll learn how the Bundeswehr fights.” Laura puffed up with pride, not even remembering that her classmates were civilians with no military training.

“All right, let’s form up teams and then all practice after class! I’ve always wanted to do something like this.” Charlotte’s passion was visible under her air of unconcerned enthusiasm.

“Everything lies in the way of the blade... The true meaning of bushido is found in death.” Houki spoke tersely, an intense look on her face, only to be interrupted with Ling’s “Wait, we’re not trying to get anyone killed here.”

“Anyway!” Houki continued, banging on the table. “I meant, it’s with this that we can give it our all.”

Everyone nodded with a nervous swallow.

“And. This won’t be a lewd delusion, it’ll be the real Ichika...”

Houki's voice was husky, and the faces of her opponents, other than Kanzashi, flushed red.

"No, that wasn't like this! That was just psychological warfare!"

"Indeed! Really, it's a problem that it managed to seem so realistic..."

Remembering how vivid their experiences in the World Purge were, they each shrunk into themselves.

That... That was different from this...

But he truly was wonderful in that dream...

It's not like I didn't want it, but maybe it went too far...

Mine was a nightmare! No matter what, it wasn't something I was actually thinking!

Each had their own excuse that they couldn't quite believe themselves.

"Anyway! This time, it's no-holds-barred. Are you prepared?!" The smile fell from Houki's face as she spoke and was answered with nods.

"I'll show you how serious I am!"

"Who better to wear the laurel crown?"

"I won't let myself lose either!"

"Ichika is my bride!"

"...I'll win."

Flames danced in their eyes as the curtain rose on a war between maidens.



"Tatenashi, are you there?"

It was lunch break the next day, and Ichika had brought some student council paperwork to the second year classrooms to hand it over.

"Oh, it's Orimura!" Tatenashi's classmates had found him before he could find her.

"What's up? Did you need something from us?"

"We'll be happy to do anything you want, and I do mean *anything*."

"Tell us who you're after!"

Soon, he was surrounded by a gaggle of girls, some brazen enough to reach out and touch him.

"Hahaha, look at him squirm."

"Did you come here to see what a real woman looks like?"

Ichika had no idea what to do about a reception like this.

"Hey, c'mon, hold it! I came here to see Tatenashi!" he cried out. Shouting, though, was no escape from the grasping hands.

"Get his shirt!"

"Heave-ho!"

“Whooooa!” Just as he thought he was really in trouble, he heard a fan snap open.

“Oh, my, Ichika. What trouble are you up to?”

“Oh, Tatenashi! Finally! You saved—” Ichika’s hopes of salvation slipped away as Tatenashi spun on her heel and walked to her desk. “Whaaaa? What’s going on? Um, Tatenashi?”

Managing to escape, he spoke while fixing his clothes. But her reply was cold and harsh, “What is it?”

“I, uh, I came to bring that paperwork...”

“It can wait until after school. You probably just wanted to see who you could pick up, didn’t you.”

“N-No way!” He cringed at her sudden anger, and was wondering what had upset her when the bell rang. “Anyway, here, I’ll leave them. Goodbye!”

“Thank you for finishing that.”

Rather than follow his sprint out the door with her eyes, she turned to stare out the window. *Hmph. When did Ichika get so flirty with everyone?* Maybe she’d gotten used to it and that’s why she normally let it go. But when he showed up today... Just remembering it made her mad.

Hmph! Without noticing it, she had worked her way up into jealous frustration in a way she never had before. *It’s Ichika’s fault. If he wanted me for something, he should have just texted. I even gave him my number, and still, he never does.* Tatenashi pulled out her phone and looked at the ‘from Ichika’ folder.

[I’ll be late to student council today.]

[I’m finished with the paperwork.]

[I finished the club schedule.]

They were all about work! And she had still saved them all! *Can’t he ask me out or something? Just once? I can’t believe him.* It was only then that she realized how red her face had gotten thinking of him. *But... But it’s not like I’m in, in...* No. Tatenashi couldn’t finish that sentence.

She took deep breath after deep breath trying to calm down. All right. That was better.

“Now, Sarashiki. If you could open your book?” Tatenashi snapped back to reality as her teacher’s face filled her vision.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Flustered, she opened her textbook.

“I know it’s good to be thoughtful, but you shouldn’t take it too far. Especially about boys.”

It wasn’t like that. But Tatenashi, unable to explain how it wasn’t, let out a sigh.



"I really didn't expect to get told to go shopping."

"Are you complaining? Even though I'm coming along to help?"

Laura gave Ichika a frustrated poke. The two had left campus after school to shop for supplies for the upcoming field day. Now, they'd just stepped off the bus and were about to walk into the mall by the station, where they could find just about anything.

"All right, first up, hmm... Fifty anpan? Yeah, we're going to have to get those delivered."

"Anpan? Oh, you mean those buns filled with bean jam? Why do we need so many?" Laura looked inquisitively at Ichika.

"They're for the bread-eating contest. It's one of the traditional competitions, have you heard of it? They get hung on strings, and then you have to jump and bite into them."

"What's the point of that?"

"It's all in the technique. Anyway, let's get this done with."

Ichika took Laura's hand, and there was no more need for words. *He's gotten a lot better at dealing with women...* Leading Laura around like a pet, Ichika ordered the buns.

"What next?"

"Looks like headbands and gloves."

"Hmm. Will we be having those delivered?"

"Yeah."

A question mark floated over Laura's head in response to Ichika's casual nod, "So why did you invite me along, then? I thought I was here to carry things."

"There's no way I'd make a girl do the heavy lifting. But that green tea café we went to before has new things on their menu, so I wanted to stop in for a drink with you."

Laura's heart somersaulted at Ichika's casual grin. Things had changed since the World Purge, and it seemed like he was a lot less distant. *It definitely looks like he's gotten more comfortable with girls now...* Laura had expected this to play right into her own assertive style, but somehow turning from the hunter to the hunted only revealed her own naïveté. *Still. It feels nice to be alone together.* As they walked hand-in-hand through the crowded mall, she focused on the feel of his hand around hers. Its warm, tender clasp. She let that warmth wash over her.

"All right, here we are. See? They have green tea shakes now."

"Yeah."

"These days everyone keeps selling shakes all through the fall. I guess it makes sense, it's still pretty hot."

"Yeah!"

Ichika chuckled at her energetic nodding.

"Wait, Laura, are you nervous about something?"

“Wh-What are you talking about, you idiot?!”

Worried that he might have been able to tell by her body heat, she suddenly snatched her hand back and paced into the café.

“Hey, wait, you don’t need to— Oh, right, sorry! Could we have two green tea shakes?” Ichika called across the counter to a friendly-looking twenty-something lady who half-smiled apologetically.

“I’m sorry. We’re down to the last one.”

“Oh, really? Uh, hmm. Just the one, then. And an iced green tea latte.”

“Will that be all?”

With a quick nod, Ichika paid and took their drinks. Taking the tray in hand, he followed along beside Laura. “Do you see any empty seats? I’d rather not sit by the window, it’s probably pretty toasty... Hmm.”

“I-It’s fine! I don’t mind!”

“Oh? Then let’s sit there.”

They sat across a table for two. Laura’s heart began to pound at how manly Ichika seemed today.

“All right, here you go.”

“How much was it? Let me pay you back.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my treat.” Ichika was now, at least provisionally, a Japanese National Cadet, and received a decently large stipend. However, his generosity wasn’t because he was suddenly loaded. It was because Laura was a girl. Ichika was sure of it in his own mind.

“Uh, thanks...” Laura lifted the shake to her lips, and her face lit up as she took a sip. “This is great! How do they get it this tasty? Is it honey? Bean paste, maybe?”

Laura stared in fascination at the shake, and Ichika in turn watched her bemusedly. His own iced green tea latte was tasty, sure, but Laura’s reaction made it seem like her drink was even better.

“It’s that good? Too bad we didn’t get here early enough to get two of them, then.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll let you have some of mine.” Laura pushed her cup toward Ichika.

“Oh, thanks.” Ichika popped the straw into his mouth and took a sip. “Ooh! This is really good!”

“I-Isn’t it?!” Suddenly realizing that they’d indirect-kissed, Laura snatched her shake back from Ichika.

“H-Hey, why’d you do that?”

“B-Because.”

She sucked on the straw, trying to calm her heart. *I... I indirectly kissed him! What do I do? What do I do?!*

Just as the idea of asking Klarissa whether she should apply for

maternity leave rushed through her head, she noticed familiar faces outside the window. *Wait, is that Charlotte?! What's she doing here?* It wasn't just Charlotte. It was several of their classmates. It seemed like they were out shopping after school, too.



“Ichika. We need to get out of here. Let’s go.”

“Eh? What’s wro—”

“Just hurry up!”

“This should be far enough.” Laura had dragged Ichika into the blinking lights and loud booms of a video arcade. The multicolored gleam illuminated a scene of teddy bears behind glass, flashy games, and loud light-gun shooters. None of them were like anything Laura had seen before. “W-What is this place?”

“Huh? It’s an arcade.”

“Oh, so that’s...” She caught a glimpse of the “Plush Catcher” machine a friend had told her about. “So you pick them up with that arm? I see.”

“Wanna give it a try?”

Just as Laura began to nod, she noticed Charlotte and her group pass by the entrance. Panicking, she pulled Ichika into a nearby booth.

“What’s gotten into you, Laura? Why are you dragging me around?”

“Shut up, you idiot! Just be quiet!”

“Be quiet? Wait, you wanted to try this?” Ichika and Laura were in a photo booth.

“What even is it?”

“It takes your picture, and prints it out on a sticker. Why don’t we do it to remember this?”

“W-Wait, what? Hold on, I—” Laura, who hadn’t dressed up to be photographed, tried to act hesitant, but Ichika was already feeding coins into the slot.

“C’m on, Laura, pick a frame.”

“W-Wait, what? What do I pick?!”

“Whichever one you like. Look, there’s one with a black rabbit.”

“Ooh! Let’s do that one!” With a beep, the machine switched to pen input mode.

“You’re supposed to write something now, Laura.”

“Hmm... Can I just write whatever I want?” Laura cleared her throat nervously. “Ichika, how much German do you speak?”

“Uhh. ‘Baumkuchen’ means ‘good morning,’ right?”

All right... Ichika being a moron is coming in handy.

“Okay, there.”

The shutter clicked, and then the machine spoke. “Out of frame. Please step closer.”

Surprised, Ichika and Laura bunched up in front of the camera. Laura’s heart was about to jump out of her chest, but somehow, she managed to stay calm and hold it together until the photo was taken.

“All right, they’re done!”

They each took 10 of the 20 stickers to remember the day by.

Below their faces was written, in German, “Ewige Liebe,” eternal love.



“Looks like I’m not going to be able to just sit around waiting for it to repair itself.” Tatenashi, in her IS suit for once, hopped out of the fully-opened Mysterious Lady for a quick break. She was in the IS hangars, and the time was coming up on 8 P.M. “The internals are coming along fine, but the armor and weapons are still a wreck. There’s no way I can call myself the strongest in this state, now, can I?”

Her soliloquy was interrupted by the sound of a door sliding open.

“You look like you need a break, Tatenashi.”

The sudden appearance of Ichika, holding a tray, spooked her, “Wha— I-Ichika?! What are you—”

Not wanting to deal with Ichika or the meal he’d brought, she put the Mysterious Lady between them, then spun away from his accusing stare.

“Kanzashi told me you were here. I brought some light potato salad sandwiches. You like those, right, Tatenashi—Katana?”

Ba-dum. That was a low blow. Hearing her real name out of nowhere flipped her world upside down.

“...You’re such a brown-noser,” she shot back quietly, but Ichika didn’t hear. And since she’d skipped dinner, the smell wafting up from that midnight snack was irresistible. “I’ll have it later. Just leave it there.”

She jerked her head up and to the side, motioning for him to leave, but he replied, “We never get to eat together anymore, so why don’t we tonight?”

‘No thanks!’ was what she wanted to say, but that would be wasting the chance. Tatenashi ran her fingers through her hair, stealthily activating the hangar door’s lock.

“Let me set it up on the tab—”

She suddenly cut herself off. *I don’t want to be looking into his eyes while we eat! That would be bad. Really, really bad.* A disquiet she couldn’t quite put her finger on ran up on her spine.

“Let’s sit on the floor!”

“Huh?”

“Let’s eat sitting on the floor. We can sit back-to-back.”

Arg! *What am I saying?* No... Actually, that was a really good idea. *Huh? I think that’s actually the best idea I could’ve had. Go, me!* She couldn’t cheer herself on or give a thumbs-up visibly, but she definitely was in her head.

“Oh, uh, okay. I guess.”

Ichika sat down on the floor, pulling his knees up. Tatenashi then

sat behind him with her knees up too. This way, they couldn't see each other's faces, but they could still feel that the other was there. The combined closeness and distance had its own appeal.

You know, I think I like this..., Tatenashi thought to herself, as she leaned back into him and felt him respond. *He must be getting embarrassed*, she thought. She was close enough to him, now, to feel that. She wanted to nod to herself.

"Hey, Ichika."

"Mm?"

"How have things been going?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, how's it been?"

"Like, really, what? Hahaha."

She turned bright red at his laugh and she replied, "Oh, just everything! How's everything going?!"

Her face wasn't that of the head of the Sarashiki family. It was that of an average 17-year-old.

"Everything? Well, not bad, I guess."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?" It was Tatenashi's turn to laugh. "Haha. You're so silly."

"I am not."

"You totally are."

"Really, I'm not! C'mon, let's eat."

Tatenashi, her mood improved, took a bite from her sandwich wedge.

"Mmm, this is delicious."

"You're welcome."

"Oh, are you mad about something?"

"I-I am not!"

"You definitely are."

"No I'm not!"

Leaving it at that, Tatenashi reached out for another sandwich wedge.

"Ah—"

Her hand brushed against Ichika's, and their mouths both opened at the same time.

"....."

"....."

The two fell back into silence. Tatenashi used to be able to brush things like this off effortlessly, but now she couldn't. *What do I say? I need to say something...* All the initiative her age advantage normally gave her was gone. Now she was just a girl in love for the first time.

Ugh... She couldn't even glare at him when they were back to back. Now that she thought of it, she couldn't help but wonder what

expression was on his face. He wasn't angry, she thought. No, now that the idea was in her head—

Ugh! She couldn't stop it from racing through her mind. Suddenly, she spun around and wrapped her arms around him.

"Wha?!" Ichika yelped in surprise. "What are you doing?!"

"Hehe..." Tatenashi was a little surprised at her own embarrassed grin in reaction. "Ichika, your shoulders are so broad!"

"Huh? What are you... Of course they are, I'm a guy."

"You sure are, aren't you! Ahaha!" While Ichika brushed it off as her usual teasing, Tatenashi freaked out and began to babble to herself. *Hehe. He's definitely a guy.* She smiled even as she could feel her heart twist in knots.

"Anyway, I should get going."

"EHH?!" she unintentionally shouted in surprise. She hadn't even done anything yet! More importantly, *he* hadn't done anything to her yet! Her mind raced in the way only a maiden's could. "W-Wait! I need you for something."

"Mm? What?" Ichika asked back. If he turned and they came face to face, it would all be over.

Tatenashi was silent, her cheeks turning redder and redder. Almost bashfully, she searched for the right word.

".....S-Se—"

"Huh?"

"Se-Service! I need you to help me service my IS!"

It took everything she had to finish her sentence like that, but Ichika just smiled back and said, "Oh, sure, fine. Not sure how much help I'll be, but I'm up for it."

Gleaming, carefree, pure, the smile of a little boy.

"Mm..."

It was so bright she couldn't look directly at it. Tatenashi gazed down at her shoes, turning back to the Mysterious Lady without making eye contact with Ichika. *I'm an idiot! A total idiot!* It was all she could do to keep from stomping her feet.



The next day, Cecilia walked up to Ichika as soon as class let out for lunch.

"Shall we have lunch together today, Ichika? There's no need to answer, I already know your answer is 'yes.'"

As Ichika wondered why she was suddenly being so bossy, astounding words left her mouth, "I packed my own, and I've already taste-tested it."

A shiver ran up and down Ichika's spine.

"Cecilia! Are you feeling okay? Does anywhere hurt?!"

“Hmm? I’m perfectly fine.”

“Ugh... You’re already past the point where you can feel pain... Why would you...”

He cursed his own powerlessness. Why couldn’t he have stopped her before it was too late? Ichika couldn’t help but feel that it was all his fault.

“Ichika, you don’t happen to be pondering something extremely rude, now, do you?”

“You don’t need to strain yourself talking. Don’t worry. I’ll never forget you...”

“As. I. Was. Saying. This time, I measured my ingredients carefully and paid close attention to the recipe.” A shocking statement. But one which didn’t seem to be a lie.

“Uhh... Uh, really?”

Charlotte put Ichika’s remaining worries to rest, “It’s fine. I lent her the cookbook.”

“I see... Good... She’s gonna be okay...”

“Hahaha,” Charlotte couldn’t help herself, and let out a wry giggle as Cecilia pouted with puffed cheeks.

“This is simply beyond rude!”

Cecilia had learned to cook. News spread rapidly, first through the classroom, then the floor, and finally the entire school. To top it all off, even the intercom opened up with *[This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill.]*

“Ugh!” Cecilia glared up at Ichika, tears in her eyes.

In response, he gently patted her head while smoothly calming her, “Thanks, Cecilia. Let’s have lunch together.”

“Yes! Oh, yes!” Even Houki and Laura were content to let her bask in her small victory. “Then! To the rooftop!”

Cecilia spoke as if singing, grasped Ichika’s hand and strode as if waltzing.

A change of scene: the school rooftop. The autumn wind had grown chill, but the sun’s rays were still pleasantly warm.

“Today, I made tomato soup and ham salad sandwiches!”

Cecilia and Ichika sat side-by-side on a bench. Ichika apprehensively opened the lunch box she offered, only to find nothing unusual. *Is there a hidden trap?* he pondered, but Cecilia’s blissful smile wiped his worries away.

“Enjoy!”

“Thanks.”

Munch.

Sip, sip. Gulp.

“Wow, this is good.”

Cecilia giggled, “But isn’t it!”

She seemed truly happy as she pulled out the tomato soup. It was excellent, salted just right.

“Wow, Cecilia! You really did it!”

“It took some doing, but frankly, I’m quite pleased with myself.”

“No, really, I’m amazed. I’d always heard that the English were, like, tone-deaf but for tastes instead.” Remembering his complaints earlier, he sunk his head apologetically and continued, “Oh, it’s fine. I share in the fault, at least.”

She remembered her own initial suspicion of Ichika, and was nothing but embarrassed.

“Can I ask, though? What prompted the change of heart?”

“Eh?”

“I mean, why did you decide to follow the recipes and taste them before you put them on the table.”

“It was because of Chelsea.” As Ichika wondered how she was involved, Cecilia continued, “I sampled both something I made my way and something I made following her suggestions.”

“Wow, that’s—” He cut himself off before he could finish with “pretty reckless.”

“And I found that Chelsea’s tasted better than mine.”

“Well obviously,” he whispered to himself.

“And naturally, an Alcott can’t accept defeat. So, when faced with an opportunity to march forward on the chef’s path...”

“Wow, and that’s all it took? I’m impressed.”

“Well... I also needed someone to feed...” Cecilia pressed both palms to her cheeks, demurely. Together, Ichika and Cecilia enjoyed their lunch, looking up at the wide blue sky.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Truly.”

A peaceful respite. A gentle respite. Until Tatenashi noticed... Tatenashi, a home-cooked lunch in her hand, quickly hid it behind her back when she noticed Ichika was looking.

“Oh, hey, Tatenashi. What’s up?”

“Nothing much. I just like to come up on the roof sometimes. Ahaha...”

Forcing a smile, she turned about-face and fled. *I’m an idiot! A total idiot!* Ichika, with no idea of what was going through her head, could only watch in confusion.

Chapter II: Fighting Now

A week later, the upperclasswomen had been run ragged preparing for the sudden, first-years-only, Field Day. Some among them had caused quite the disturbance with their insistence that, as national cadets, they should be allowed to compete for Ichika as well. In the end, Tatenashi had managed to calm them by promising that all who contributed enough would earn “backstage points” good for... certain privileges... relating to Ichika. And now it was the big day.

“The First Year National Cadet Field Day will now commence!” The crowd responded to Tatenashi with a cheer. “And here’s Orimura Ichika with our Pledge of Fair Play!”

Her finger plunged forth, thrusting at the only person present wearing shorts.

“Me?!” Ichika was bewildered by the sudden voluntelling, but once Tatenashi’s fangs sunk into her prey she’d never let go.

“C’mon, hurry it up.”

“Ouch!” He was dragged to the podium forcibly. “Um...”

Ichika looked out across the crowd of girls. Each of them were wearing bloomers which showed off their legs and hip lines almost dazzlingly. *I can barely keep my eyes off them...* For some reason, even Tatenashi and the other upperclasswomen were wearing them. Shyly, Ichika struggled to form his sentences, “Err... I’m Orimura Ichika.”



“And?” Tatenashi leaned in to whisper. Her bosom barely brushed his elbow, but he was intensely aware of its soft springiness.

“Th-The Pledge of Fair Play!”

Cheers of encouragement arose from the crowd as he tried to steady his voice.

“You can do it, Orimura!”

“Do your best! Show us something awesome!”

“Smile, Orimu! Smile!”

Ichika’s face reddened from the high-pitched voices even as he struggled on, “We... We pledge to play fair and play hard!”

Waves of cheers spread through the crowd as he began. But among them, six failed to join.

Red team leader, Shinonono Houki.

“I won’t let anyone beat me. I’ll win, and Ichika will be mine.”

Blue team leader, Cecilia Alcott.

“Elegantly and precisely, I’ll make you mine, Ichika.”

Pink team leader, Huang Lingyin.

“I’m gonna win! I’m definitely gonna win! Just you wait, Ichika!”

Orange team leader, Charlotte Dunois.

“I have every right to be assertive too. Right, Ichika?”

Black team leader, Laura Bodewig.

“Living with Ichika... Spending every night in the same bed as Ichika... Haha, hahaha. Bwahahaha!”

Iron team leader, Sarashiki Kanzashi.

“Is iron even a color? I guess it is...”

Fighting spirit blazed in their eyes. And suddenly, as Ichika stepped down from the podium with a sigh of relief, Tatenashi embraced him from behind.

“You’re the star of the show! No slacking off!”

“Whaa?! Hey, knock it off! They’ll kill us if they see this.”

“Don’t worry. I’m strong.”

“You might be safe, but I’m not.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! They can’t see us.”

“Jeez...” Just as Ichika gave a resigned smile, Tatenashi, who had previously been in complete control, turned beet-red and jumped back. “Huh? Tatenashi?”

“A-Anyway! I have to go announce!” With that, she sped off.

“Huh? Hey, wait!”

As Tatenashi’s feet pounded on the ground, her face reddened as she remembers Ichika’s feel, his smile, and his faintly musky smell. *I can’t believe I let myself get carried away like that...* She’d lost all control, carried away by the untameable swings of a maiden’s heart.



It was finally Field Day, and the first event was the 50-meter dash. Ling, fired up and ready to go, immediately made her way over to the announcer's stand and caught Ichika.

"Hey, hey, Ichika! Help me out stretching, okay? I need you to press on my back."

She sat down, spreading her legs to stretch, and as she did he noticed she was wearing bloomers too. He was dazzled by the beautiful curves of her legs. *Man, what's wrong with me? World Purge must've really knocked something loose in my head.* All the girls around him seemed different from before, more like women. And not just in the way Chifuyu was. In a way that made his pulse pound.

"Ichika? What's the holdup? Hurry it up!"

"Oh, sure."

He pressed on Ling's back. It was soft, in a way no boy's was, and this only added to his nervousness, as did the feel the stitching of her bra left on his fingertips. *So even Rin's wearing one now, too...* Ichika stared off into space, pondering the obvious. ***Push, push, push.***

"Ow! Ichika! That hurts!" Without even noticing, he'd bent Ling double with the ground, and she cried out in pain. "What the heck is wrong with you?!"



"Oh, sorry. I got distracted."

"Huh? Whaa...?"

A befuddled Ling. An equally befuddled Ichika. Eventually, their confused gazes met.

"Sorry. I should get going."

"Ah, um... Okay..."

"See you later."

"Yeah."

As they shared a moment of embarrassment, the other five watched with unusual intensity.

"Ugh, that Ling..."

"Simply unforgivable."

"No trying to get a head start."

"She needs a good punching."

"That's ten million times unfair."

And then, it was time for the 50-meter dash.

Bang! The starting pistol roared.

"Move it, move it!"

Leaping forth, her pigtails swinging in time with her stride, was Ling. She ran as if she'd been trained by a ninja, never letting them droop toward the ground.

"And the first point goes to Ling's team!" The announcer was not Tatenashi, but Kaoruko from the newspaper club. The lens of her camera, and the lenses of her trademark glasses, gleamed in the sun. She swiftly turned the mic on Ichika and said, "All right, Orimura! What do you think?"

"Umm, Rin's light and nimble, which I think is working out for her."

"That's it?! C'mon, you're the star of the show! Get more into it!"

Ichika wasn't sure whether he really *could*, but he did realize that he was expected to shower praise on the girls today. He leaned back into the microphone and said, "Oh, and she's cute, too. That helps."

This was enough to fire up the crowd. Ling blushed as she wiped the sweat from her face.

"...All right! This is Houki! I'm up next, and I'm gonna show you what you're up against!"

"Ah! You just want to make yourself look good!"

"Wha— No, no way! I just don't want Ling to get too far ahead!"

"See, you're doing it again!"

As Houki's friends mercilessly elbowed her, Cecilia was absorbed in her stretch routine.

"I will wear the laurels. I was born to wear them!" She tossed back her hair to the side, and the aroma of expensive perfume spread through the air.

“I’m not gonna lose, either!” Charlotte stretched her back, as far as it could go. “Phew!”

As she exhaled and came back upright, her breasts bounced.

“And there’s Charlotte’s team, trying for the sex appeal points!”

“Ehh?! No—”

“She knows every trick in the book, and she’s trying them all! French National Cadet, Charlotte Dunois!”

“No, really, I wasn’t!” Embarrassed, her eyes flitted over to Ichika as she covered her chest. Suspicion, jealousy, and accusations followed in return. As he shook his head in an attempt to clear his name, Charlotte spun around in disappointment. But the cruelest reality waited in the next heat.

“On your marks, ready... Go!”

As the echo of the starting pistol rang out, Houki and Cecilia sprang out to an early lead. Panicking, Charlotte tried to catch up, but only managed to tangle her legs together and tumble to a stop.

“No way...” As she watched Cecilia cross the finish line, tears welled up in Charlotte’s eyes. “Oww...”

Her knees were scratched up. Her spirits were sinking deeper and deeper, until Ichika walked up to her.

“Are you okay, Charl? You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Eh? No, just...”

“Your knees look like they’re hurt. Let me carry you to the first aid tent.”

“No, wait, I can...” She couldn’t hide how upset she was, but her legs really did hurt. So shyly, she climbed up onto Ichika’s back.

“Here goes!”

“I’m... I’m not too heavy, am I?”

“Of course not. It’s like carrying cotton candy.”

“Really?” Charl giggled.

Houki and Cecilia glared in unconcealed envy as Charlotte found an unexpected advantage.

“Why, and after I came first!”

“You’ll pay for this, Charlotte.”

Oblivious to the daggers shooting from their eyes, Charlotte held close to Ichika’s back. *His shoulders are so broad...* The functional beauty of his muscles, his robust bones. The parts of Charlotte that were “girl” couldn’t help but notice the parts of Ichika which were anything but.

Meanwhile, Ichika’s heart throbbed at the feel of her breasts on his back, the softness of her thighs, and more than anything her sweet smell. *This... This is bad. Why* it was, he had no words for. But the entirely normal reaction of a healthy teenage boy to a girl was becoming an emergency.

“Let’s hurry up, Charl.”

“Eh? Oh, okay.”

“Hold on tight!”

Ichika took off, racing toward the first aid tent. Passing her off to the school nurse, he left with a quick “See ya!”

“Ah Ichika, wait—” Charlotte had just wanted to say thanks, but her hand extended into empty air before being slowly drawn back. *Ehehe. Maybe that was still some good luck!* Running her hands over the parts of her thighs Ichika had touched, Charlotte was buoyed with pleasure.

“Mm.”

“Hmm.”

Laura and Kanzashi watched thoughtfully from their starting places as Ichika carried Charlotte off.

“Go!”

The report of the pistol was matched with a line of girls racing forth. All but Laura and Kanzashi, who immediately tripped on purpose.

“Medic! Meeeeeedic!”



“Owwie...” Ichika, who’d been watching, approached—a paper fan borrowed from Kaoruko in his hand. With quick baps, he swung at them.

“What are you doing?!”

“That hurts.”

Avoiding their accusing stares, he helped Laura and Kanzashi to their feet, then said, “If you do silly things like that, you may really get hurt.”

“Mm...”

“Sorry...”

Seeing their contrition, he brushed the dirt off them and sighed, “C’mon, get running. I guess it’s almost over, but still.”

Laura and Kanzashi felt the blood rush to their heads at his unexpected touch.

“Yeah!”

“I’ll do my best.”

And thus, the 50-meter dash ended. Ling’s team held the lead.



“Next up is the IS Academy special—the Ball Pop!” Kaoruko roared into the mic.

“Ball... pop?”

Ichika was sure he’d misheard “ball toss” or something, but Tatenashi, having recovered from her mental overload, was there to explain, “It’s a school tradition! Each team tries to snipe the most floating balls out of the air with their IS! The smaller ones are worth bonus points.”

“Sounds like it’ll be a mess.”

“But that’s what makes it fun!” Tatenashi snapped open a fan reading ‘entertainment.’

“All right, cadets, get ready for action! But remember, no IS suits today! You’re going to please the crowd by doing it in your bloomers!”

A crowd of exactly one.

“Ohoho, you mean me?” The school janitor grinned, ruddy-cheeked.

“No, no! Not you, you creep!” Kaoruko answered the open palm latched onto her butt with a high kick. Nimble, the janitor—if he really was—dodged, and made his way away.

“All right, deploy the drone launcher!”

A pillar of light shimmered into existence in the middle of the field and formed into a machine. Ichika was reminded of how amazing IS Academy was by the use of the latest technology for Field Day.

“Is everyone ready?! Student Council President Sarashiki Tatenashi will announce the next match!”

With a quick high-five, Kaoruko swapped places with Tatenashi, who immediately spoke up, then immediately took up her camera and left to mingle with the cadets.

“Focus! Readiness! My heart is as serene as still water!” Shinonono Houki, IS Akatsubaki.

“Prepare to be entranced. I, Cecilia Alcott, will play you a rondo with my Blue Tears!” Cecilia Alcott, IS Blue Tears.

“Nothing says I have to shoot them, so get ready to see what I can do!” Huang Lingyin, IS Shenlong.

“I’ve got the mobility to keep up! Let’s go, Revive!” Charlotte Dunois, IS Rafale Revive Custom II.

“Know your powerlessness.” Laura Bodewig, IS Schwarzer Regen.

“...I’ll do what I must. Okay, Uchigane Nishiki?” Sarashiki Kanzashi, IS Uchigane Nishiki.

With the six first year cadets gathered together, the crowd was on the edge of their seats.

“Go for it, Houkicchi!”

“You’ve got this, Cecilia!”

“Rin! That’s the stuff, Rin!”

“Do your best, Dunois!”

“Win this, Laura!”

“Wow. You gonna be alright, Kans? Yeah, I know you will! Hip-hip-hooray!”

As cheers for each rang out, they formed a loose circle around the launcher. With practiced movements, they flitted up into the air.

“All right! IS Ball Pop, ready, go!”

A fountain of balls in all sizes sprayed forth from the launcher. Charlotte was the first to grasp their path.

“*Rain of Saturday!*” Calling submachine guns into both of her hands, she shattered target after target with guns akimbo. A hail of plusses beat down on her indicator on the scoreboard.

“Not bad! But can you beat this?” From beside Charlotte’s position at range, the Akatsubaki soared skyward. “Haaaaaaah!”

Houki spiraled into the air, Karaware in one hand and Amazuki in the other.

“Oh my, Houki. You certainly wouldn’t be taking my targets, would you?”

Bwrrrm! Blue flashes pierced the sky around her, bolts of BT lasers from the Blue Tears’s bits.

“The golden ball, and its points, are mine!” Just as Cecilia lined up her shot, her target split in half.

“Hehe! That’s what I was after!” Ling’s Souten Gagetso cleaved it in twain as she fired downward with her impact cannon. “Hahaha. Got ’em—”

Before Ling's shots found their target, they fizzled into the air. Looking closely, the targets had stopped falling as well.

"That must be... Laura!"

The Schwarzer Regen's active inertial canceler had formed a protective wall, halting their descent.

"Hmph— There!" Her high-caliber railgun spat fire. An instant later, the balls stopped by her AIC were destroyed. Her carefully-aimed fusillade brought her to the top of the scoreboard.

"Was this supposed to be a competition? C'mon, Ichika! Tell her how good she did!"

"Huh?! Er, uh... Not bad, Laura!" In contrast to Tatenashi's enthusiasm, it was all Ichika could do to squeeze out a safe compliment. It was still enough to turn Laura's cheeks red.

"Of course! For me, this is as simple as..." Laura's bashful tapping of her index fingers together was met with steely glares from the others, one of whom had spotted her chance.

"Multi-target lock-on, complete..." Locking onto the hail of falling of bars, she fired all her missiles. As many as Uchigane Nishiki could fire.

"Sarashiki Kanzashi is racking up the points! I'm proud of my little sister. Do your best, Kanzashi!"

"Do you normally take sides like this?"

"Ahahaha, I figured a little bit would be fine."

Kanzashi watched the interplay at the announcer stand, a blush growing on her face as she wished her sister would stop. The match continued to heat up, and as the scores began to even out, Houki paused in thought for a moment.

I wonder if there's some way to just win this outright. Some way to blow the competition away. Some way to sweep Ichika off his feet. I know! If she could get up on the launcher and jam Ugachi in... That would work. The problem's the timing. And making sure no one realizes what I'm doing. Houki looked up at the sky, and at the battle unfolding above her.

"Hey, wait, Cecilia!"

"That one's mine, Laura!"

"Whoa— Cecilia! Don't just get in my way!"

"You're the one in the way, Charlotte."

"Hmph! Ling, those points are mine!"

The five of them are too busy fighting each other. Now's my chance! Houki's eyes gleamed as she landed momentarily to charge her Ugachi high-output energy cannon. Dropping to a crouch, her shoulder units slid open, and energy began to focus. *This is the perfect timing! I can do it!* As a confident grin rose to Houki's face, the squabbles above her grew more intense.

“There!”

Ling spun out of the way of Cecilia’s shot, before slamming into Charlotte.

“Hey! That was dangerous!”

“Whoaaaaa!” Charlotte, losing her balance, sprayed machine gun fire.

“Ah...” The barrage connected with a missile from Kanzashi, which detonated before it found its mark.

“Huh? Wai—” The explosion blew Laura forward, and tensing, she squeezed the trigger of her revolver cannon— Which was pointed down at Houki.

“W-What?!” Houki flinched out of the way, avoiding a direct hit, but sending Ugachi’s aim swinging wildly.

And it ended up pointed at...

“Hey, wait, waaait! That thing’s expensive!” Tatenashi’s complaints were for naught as the blast of energy destroyed the launcher with a deafening boom.

“Wait, no, sorry, I wasn’t trying to—” All eyes were on Houki. And none of the stares were especially forgiving. “Hmph! What a piece of garbage!”

The field fell silent as Tatenashi opened her mouth and said, “Team Houki, minus two hundred points.”

Houki shrieked in dismay.



“All right, next up is the basic training obstacle course!” Tatenashi nearly screamed into the mic. It was a credit to its own quality that it carried her voice without feedback or clipping.

“I have to ask, why basic training? Won’t that be too easy?”

“Like in the military.”

“Okay...”

“So you don’t realize what’s coming up?”

“Not really.”

Tatenashi sighed at Ichika’s confusion, and adjusted her grip on the microphone.

“Let me explain! The first step on the obstacle course is assembly of an assault rifle!”

Tatenashi’s finger swung around to a table covered with gun parts.

“Next, they’ll climb a three-meter ladder while carrying the rifle, and cross a five-meter girder while keeping their balance! Of course, there’ll be a net below for safety,” she winked. “After that, there’s a slide down a pole, and once they’re back on solid ground, they’ll advance in a crawl! All without taking either hand off their rifle!”

Ichika, thinking it’d be rude to cut in, just nodded in agreement.

“And last, but not least! The shooting gallery! Each contestant has only one bullet! If they miss, they’ve got to run all the way back!”

Only at IS Academy would the crowd find this exciting. But Ichika couldn’t help but feel out of place, and he commented, “Sometimes I still can’t believe what they get up to here.”

“Well, get used to it.” Tatenashi snapped open a fan reading ‘open mind.’

“Hey, Orimu! Look at me!” Miss Casual, on Kanzashi’s team, waved up at him. As Ichika returned her gesture, the entire field for the first heat waved back.

“Well, aren’t you popular.”

“I’ve told you before, it’s just because I’m a novelty.”

“...Perhaps.” Ichika couldn’t make out Tatenashi’s whispered reply, but his questioning look was interrupted by the starting pistol.

Bang! The girls were off.

“Wow, Miss Casual’s so slow.”

“Just watch.” Finally, arriving at the table after all the others, she began to assemble the parts. By the time she started, the other girls were already halfway through. But just as Ichika began to fret, she held up a completed rifle.

“Ta-dah!” It was perfect. Not a part out of place. Proudly brandishing it in both hands, Miss Casual took two or three strides’ lead while the other girls looked up in surprise.



“No way. I can’t believe she—”

“She’s very good with her hands.”

“That’s more than just *good*.”

“She and her sister are the best in the crew program. It’s almost scary to watch.”

That stirred something loose in Ichika’s memory. Utsuho the dismantler. Honne the assembler. The Nohotoke sisters were famous, in their own way.

“She still has her weak points, though.”

“Huh?”

Tatenashi pointed to where Miss Casual was lining up her shot. The bang unique to exploding gunpowder roared out, and a bullet flew forth. But, good though her stance was, that bullet kept flying far out of sight.

“Huh, that’s not right.” Miss Casual tilted her head in confusion, then ran back for another bullet. But her next shot, and its next, and the next after, each missed, and by the time she scored a hit she was in last place.

“I see... Zero points for marksmanship.” It was almost pitiful. But as he looked down, hoping to shoot her a look of consolation, their eyes met.

“Hey, Orimu! Did you see me?” She hopped from foot to foot, her pendulous breasts bouncing side-to-side in time. Ichika, who was looking directly at them, tried to avert his eyes while blushing.

Sqwunch!

“Oww!” His side was suddenly pinched. By Tatenashi, of course.

“Get back to announcing, boy!”

“Okay, okay...” Taking the mic, Ichika roared as loudly as he could. “Do. Your. Beeeeesssssstttt!”

As one, and at once, the girls’ eyes gleamed with resolve. They couldn’t agree on much, but if Ichika was watching them, there was one thing they could agree on. That slim glimmer of hope, amplified in the ways only a teenage girl’s fantasies could, united them.

The excitement held up through the race, and in the end, Laura’s team, which had practiced extensively, took the victory.

“And now it’s my turn to shine!” Cecilia, who had been saving her energy, produced an impressive lace parasol. It was time for the cavalry battle. The rules were no different from one at a normal school, but it was rare for the contestants to be girls.

“Cecilia Alcott sallies forth!” Cecilia, striking a gallant air, climbed onto the shoulders of a group of three teammates. As she rose, the voluptuous curves of her bottom became even more obvious. The contrast of navy blue bloomers pinching into alabaster skin was dazzling.

“Ahem.” Feeling Tatenashi’s eyes upon him, Ichika cleared his throat to distract her.

“I know what you’re thinking, Ichika.”

“...How?”

“I can tell by how you’re looking at her.” Tatenashi wrapped her arms around herself, as if to ward off his prying eyes. The pose irritated Ichika.

“I-I was not!” he protested.

Even though he was frustrated with Tatenashi, he turned back to commentary. *I just need to not worry about it as much. Be natural, be natural...* He repeated it to himself like a mantra as the team introductions began.

“All eyes are sure to be on Laura as an active-duty officer, but— Oh, and there’s our first penalty! Ms. Orimura is confiscating a combat knife from her.”

“A knife? For *this*?!”

“And a Chinese scimitar from Ling.”

“Jeez, Rin!”

“And Houki! Is that a katana?”

“Have they all gone crazy?”

“A chakram has been confiscated from Charlotte.”

“Even you, Charl?!”

“Kanzashi, though, doesn’t appear to have anything. I knew my little sister was a good girl!”

“She’s blushing now.”

“How about you, Cecilia? Why don’t you show us that sniper rifle you have hidden?” Her nervous hiccup was audible across the field. With that out of the way, though, the main event of Field Day was about to begin.

“All right... Cavalry battle, ready, fight!”

At the sound of the whistle, dozens of girls sprung forth. The swiftest among them were Laura’s team.

“Right wing, fan out! Left, follow me!” Laura stood atop her teammates with her arms crossed, shouting orders which were followed with a surprising precision for schoolgirls. “Center, charge!”

“I won’t let you do that, Laura!” Charlotte’s own forces blocked Laura’s path forward.

“Hmph. So you want to be eliminated early?”

“You can try, but it won’t be easy!” Charlotte ducked past the hands grasping for her headband, and went on the attack. But against Laura, who was combat-hardened, her own efforts fell short.

“If I had my plasma dagger!”

“If only I had my pile bunker!”

The two generals entered battle with what-ifs in unison.

“So it comes to this, Cecilia!”

“I always knew this would happen, Ling!”

It’s said in myth that the fiercest enemies are the dragon and the tiger, and in poetry, a clash between two bitter foes is often alluded to as such. Ling and Cecilia were doing their best to fit the description.

“YAH!”

“HAAH!”

As their carriers clashed, their arms intertwined, fighting each other to a standstill.

“Ce-ci-li-a... Give... It... up...”

“You... First... Ling...”

They strained against each other, each occasionally relenting in hopes the other would lose their balance but unable to work their arms out of the tangle when it happened, their bodies swaying wildly. The only difference between them, the counterbalance provided by Cecilia’s breasts.

Charlotte’s battle with Laura was the same. The haves on one side, the have-nots on the other. Life was unfair. God was dead, and only the cruel truth remained.

“And there’s one other ‘have’...” Kanzashi set her sights on Houki and Houki alone. Nervously, Houki turned, her breasts following a moment later, which only added fuel to Kanzashi’s fire. “I won’t let myself lose!”

“Not bad, Kanzashi! But not enough to beat me!” Just as her counterattack began, a voice rang out, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Orimura Ichika enters the fray! Take his headband for five hundred points!”

It was Tatenashi. And the headband, like during the school play, was rigged to give an electric shock when removed, so Ichika certainly wasn’t about to give it up himself.

“This again?!”

“The more the merrier, right? Do your best!”

Everyone else turned, rounding on Ichika. After all, he was worth 500 points. No girl would pass up a chance to rocket from dead last to the top.

“**GIVE ME THAT HEADBAAAAAND!**” As one, they charged at Ichika. As he stretched out a hand to fend off their attacks, all he could grasp were breasts.

“Eeek! Ichika, you’re such a pervert~” Just to make sure she knew who she was, she followed up with “Seat number one, Aikawa Kiyoka!” Ichika couldn’t help but think that he didn’t really need the introduction.

“I-chi-kaaaaaa!” It was said that breast grudges lasted seven generations. I think. Was it? “Dieeeeeeeeeee!”

Ling swiftly deployed her IS Shenlong, firing her impact cannon as it materialized.

“Gwah!” Panicked, Ichika brought out Byakushiki’s shield to defend.

“It’s not over yet!” Flame leapt from the barrel of Schwarzer Regen’s revolver cannon. “Die! Die!”

Fleeing from the girls, Ichika took to the skies. But there, a blue flash awaited him.

“Aerial battles are just my forte.” A hail of laser fire from Blue Tears’s bits closed in from all four sides. Ichika was able to block them all with the shield on his arm-mounted Setsura, but he had nowhere left to run but even further upward.

“Got you!”

“...Check.”

A swoop downward by Houki, a barrage upward from Kanzashi. There was nowhere left to run.

“Save me, Charl!”

“...I don’t even know you.” As she spun on a heel disgustedly, Ichika was swallowed in a swarm of explosions.

Chapter III: Bubble Daydream

“Ugh... They chewed me up and spit me out...”

It was still before noon, but I was a wreck as I trudged along the... Well, officially, it was the “relaxation area,” but really you’d just call it a lawn. There were seats and benches scattered around, with girls sitting on them, all enjoying their lunches.

“What am I gonna do for lunch...” Probably have it with the usual group, I guessed.

“Ichi—”

“Found you, Ichika!” I felt something light climb onto my back. It was Rin.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Hehehe. You were lost, and I found you! You should be grateful!”

I was about to argue with her, but out of the corner of my vision, I noticed Tatenashi.

“Heeeey, Tatenashi! Let’s all have lunch together!”

“Eh? Um, uhh...” For some reason, she suddenly seemed like she was thrown off balance.

“C’mon, let’s go!” She tensed up even more as I took her hand and began to walk off. Silently, she followed, looking down at the ground and with her cheeks beginning to redden. What was up with her? Did she think it made her look like she was lost or something? A short way away, the cadets were waiting at a circle of seats spread out on the lawn.

“Oh, there you are.” Hearing her sister’s voice made Tatenashi even more embarrassed.

“Ichika, why are you holding her hand?” Houki immediately interrogated.

“Why don’t you bother Rin instead? Maybe figure out why she’s climbing on my damn back!”

“Beautiful views from up here today!”

“What are you, a meteorologist?!” Reluctantly, she hopped off, in a fluid catlike motion. “You’re still so light.”

Especially in the chest area.

“Ichikaaaa, I’m gonna kill you if you’re thinking what I think you are.”

I wasn’t! Really!

“Anyway, Tatenashi, let’s sit down.”

“Umm... But I’m a second year, and...” It wasn’t like Tatenashi to

turn down something like this.

“Doesn’t matter! I’m sure everyone’s looking forward to your cooking.”

Tatenashi cooked really well. I wasn’t a slouch myself, but I still couldn’t compete. Maybe she’d teach me? I’d have to ask her later, when things calmed down.

“Really?”

“Yeah, let’s all share. We can even feed each—”

“**Yes!**” I hadn’t even finished extending the offer to Tatenashi when Cecilia thrust a bite toward me. What was going on here?

“Relax, relax. Let’s have a cup of tea or something and calm down first.”

“**Yes!**” This time, it was Charl holding out a thermos full of tea.

“Gah! Cool it! Or at least, let other people cool it! Tatenashi’s still standing, for goodness sake!”

I beat back the rush from the others, and made a space for Tatenashi next to me.

“Hold on a moment.” There weren’t enough seats for all of us, so I spread out my handkerchief on the ground for Tatenashi. “Here you are.”

“Thanks...”

I felt like I was being a bit showy, but I couldn’t just make her sit directly on the grass. I could see the grimaces on the faces of everyone else as I did it, though.

“We really need to do something about your thing for older women, Ichika.”

“C’mon, Houki. I’m just being polite. I’m not gonna make a girl sit on the grass.”

“If you’re so concerned about treating a lady right, I could use a manservant.”

“I’m nowhere near posh enough for that.”

“Hey, Ichika, why not treat me to a parfait later? I’ve been hankering for one from San Diego, the place by the station.”

“C’mon, Rin! You still haven’t even paid me back for the ones in middle school!”

“There’s a finishing school for young gentlemen, Ichika. We could try it out together.”

“If I want to learn how to be a gentleman I can just try to imitate you, Charl.”

“Be my shield on the battlefield.”

“That’s beyond just being a gentleman, Laura.”

“No fair only doing it for my sister.”

“Sorry, Kanzashi, but I had to do something.”

While I was dealing with them, Tatenashi, the center of the mess,

snapped a fan open—of which it read “fairness.”

“I see. Why don’t we do this? For the next hour, each of you gets a private ten-minute lunch with Ichika. That way, you all get to enjoy yourselves.”

At once, everyone brightened up.

“That sounds like a great idea!” The first to speak up was Houki. Her eyes glittered as she clutched her lunchbox.

“Makes sense. I like it,” Rin agreed, too, and the other girls nodded. “Let’s choose an order by playing rock-paper-scissors, okay?”

A fist-wave, a second fist-wave, and then they showed their hands.

“All right, I’m first!” Rin cheered.

“So I’m to be second... Very well,” remarked Cecilia as her hair waved in the breeze.

“I’m third. Could be worse.” Houki stood with her arms crossed.

“...Fourth,” Kanzashi half-whispered.

“Ugh, I can’t believe I’m bringing up the rear,” Laura muttered, and Charl whispered in her ear.

“Hmm? Hmm. I see. That’s a good idea.” They’d decided on something. What agreements women come to in private are none of a man’s business.

“Hmm? What about you, Tatenashi?” I’d noticed that Tatenashi didn’t participate, and she sighed when questioned.

“Sorry. I’d love too, but I’m honestly too busy.”

“Really? It’s just a few minutes.” Something was up. This definitely wasn’t the Tatenashi I was used to. Oh well.

“All right, let’s get started! Ichika, let’s sit on that bench.”

“Okay.”

Rin dragged me off toward the bench, quickly plopping her lunch box in her lap and popping the top open.

“Ta-dah! My sweet-and-spicy cashew chicken!”

“Ooh, it looks good.”

“It doesn’t just look good, it *is* good!” She seemed pretty proud of herself. Even puffing out what little chest she had as she spoke.

The boyish look isn’t that bad, I guess. Since what’d happened a few days back, I was really starting to notice the girls, but Rin was still my precious second childhood friend.

“Anyway, let me feed you.” She took a piece of chicken in her chopsticks. “Say ‘ahh!’”

Ugh. This was gonna be a problem.

“Nah, I’m fine. People are watching. I can feed myself.”

“Seriously? *Now* you decide to be embarrassed by it? C’mon, open wide!”

“Really, I can feed myself.”

“I told you, open wide!”

“Mmph!” I’d clamped my mouth shut to show my refusal. Shut as tight as Amaterasu’s cave.

“So you don’t want to eat my cooking?” Her eyes gleamed as threateningly as swords.

“I’ll eat it, I’ll eat it! Mmm.” I quickly stuffed a piece of chicken in my mouth, but Rin’s eyes gleamed even brighter with dissatisfaction.

“I’m going to feed you! Open wide!” A piece of chicken was thrust at me like a lancepoint.

“That’s dangerous!”

“Don’t try to get away!” Rin thrust. I dodged. Rin thrust. I dodged. This happened over and over, dozens of times, until her pigtails were standing on end in frustration. “Ichikaaaaa!”

“Yeah?!”

The impact cannons of Rin’s IS Shenlong phased into existence on either side.

“If you dodge left or right, you’ll die— Just eat my food already!”

Ugh, she was taking this seriously. Rin shoved a piece of chicken straight forward. As it entered my mouth, I felt shots from the cannon blow past either side of my head. I could feel my back get covered in a cold sweat.

“So? How is it?” she asked as she gave me a more-than-perfect, 12/10 smile.

“Ymmh... It’s... good, Rin.”

“That’s nice.”

And then, her 10 minutes were up.

“I’m quite sure you’ve been looking forward to this. Next, you’ll have the privilege of tasting Cecilia Alcott’s cooking!”

I could practically hear the applause. We were at a table in the cafeteria, laid out with a fancy silk tablecloth which must have been her own. *Cecilia’s cooking has gotten a lot better, so I guess I don’t need to worry.* It wouldn’t be as bad as before. I don’t think I’d ever felt so much relief.

“And today’s menu is...”

I heard an orchestra hit. An *actual* orchestra hit. Not just some kind of sound effect like in a comic book, I swear I heard it.

“Uh, Cecilia? What’s in the bowl?” I glanced suspiciously at the lidded ramen bowl she presented.

“Aha. I’ve come to enjoy cooking!”

Ah, that explains it. No, wait, that explains nothing! I heard it again.

“And why are there antennae poking out?”

Cecilia chuckled and said, “Open it and see!”

It was some kind of crustacean. At least, it didn’t look like an actual bug. So that was okay-ish. Summoning up all of my courage, I

lifted the lid, and a waft of steam floated up.



“Gaaaaaaaah! My eyes, my eyes! It’s not just hot! It hurts! My eyes hurt! What’s in this?!”

“It’s tom yum goong. I’m not sure if you know this, but ‘tom’ means boiled, ‘yum’ is the spice mix, and ‘goong’ means shrimp.”

I knew that much! I meant, what was making it smell like that?! It was spicy! Even just the steam was too spicy!

“I cooked the finest Ise lobster, along with the best squid, oysters, abalone, salmon, and sea urch—”

“I know, I know! But why is it so red?!” The tom yum goong was bright red. Crimson, even. I could almost see it glimmer.

This soup in front of me is burning red! Its shimmering glint tells me to dig in!

“I’ve heard capsaicin gives you energy, so I used plenty of ghost peppers.”

“Ghost peppers?! You mean the hottest ones in the world?!”

“And then I spiced it up a bit with a concentrated extract, as well.”

She honestly looked pleased with herself. I could tell she was telling the truth when she said she enjoyed cooking now, so she didn’t mean any harm by it. And while things may have definitely improved, she’d done what every beginner chef does when they start to get their bearings—she’d experimented. And... *There’s no way I can eat this!*

The red one was, uh, way *more* than three times spicier. A literal red comet. The gods of death were lining up now. Covered in blackness, but burning bright red.

“Am I a dying man...”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing.” Cecilia smiled broadly as I lifted the spoon, gingerly carrying a sip of soup to my mouth.

“Ugh... My fingers hurt already...”

“What are you waiting for? Go right ahead!”

If this was how I died, so be it. *Buddha have mercy!* I dumped the spoonful of red, red soup into my mouth.

“GWAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!” It was so spicy it hurt! It hurt so much, like with the intensity of a thousand suns. The extra-super-spicy soup spread through my mouth, scorching my nostrils, burning my tongue, destroying my throat, and stabbing at my stomach. “Graack! Ghg! Grah!”

The worst part was the steam entering my lungs and choking me. Tears fell from my eyes.

“Well, well! I appreciate the tears of gratitude!”

“Ah, haha, ahahahaha...” I couldn’t taste the seafood at all. Somehow, though, I’d survived my 10 minutes with Cecilia.

“You’re late, Ichika!”

I was still gasping for air as I met up with Houki in the dining hall.

Just breathing brought fire-hot wafts of steam back and I couldn't speak up.

"Sorry," I barely managed to gasp.

"H-Hey. You're sweating like a pig. Are you okay?" Houki could tell something was wrong, and leaned forward to peer at me worriedly.

Ba-dum. For just a moment, my heart leapt.

"I... I'hhm fine..." I shied back in embarrassment, but she followed even closer. As she did, the swell of her chest tenting her gym clothes swayed alluringly.

"What happened? Be honest."

"Well, what happened was..." I explained myself.

"Ugh. Just hearing about it is making my own tongue tingle."

"Yeah... So, uh, I don't think I'm even going to be able to taste whatever you have for me..." It wasn't anything either of us were to blame for, but I still sunk my head apologetically. "Sorry, Houki."

"Well, um... Actually... Really, I think I'll have plenty of chances to show off my cooking. It's okay." She seemed a little embarrassed herself. I kind of found it cute.

I'm such a weirdo. As I self-critiqued, Houki clapped her hands together and said, "Ooh! I have an idea! Hold on a sec!"

She raced to the lunch counter. I panted like a dog as I waited, trying to cool down my tongue.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Houki had somehow managed to find a shaved ice this late in the year. It was a beautiful cup of snow with sweet adzuki beans and green tea syrup. Just looking at it cooled me down. "I talked them into making this. Have some, it should tone down the spice a bit."

"Houki."

"Wh-What?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," Houki laughed shyly. Seeing her smile sent my heart racing again.

"We don't have much time, so I guess I'd better eat quick!" I dug into the shaved ice to distract myself from thinking of her as a woman.

"H-Hey. If you eat it that quick, you're going to—"

The world froze.

"Gah, my head!" I'd given myself brain freeze. First my stomach, then my head! Was this some kind of torture? "Ughhhh..."

"It's because you ate it so quick. Jeez." Houki got up close to me and rested her palm on my forehead. "That must have hurt. You don't need to push yourself so hard."

"I guess..." Her kindness—and her breasts directly in my line of

sight—made my heart skip a beat.

“Just relax.”

“Okay.” Grateful for her concern, I slowly finished the shaved ice. And that’s how my 10 minutes with Houki went.

“And it’s finally my turn. You must be getting pretty full, Ichika.” Kanzashi held out a wafer pastry. “When you’re tired, you need sugar.”

“Sugar, huh. Yeah, you’re right. Pastry’s a sweet way to get enough of that.” I nearly rolled my eyes at my own pun.

Cough. Cough, cough. Eh? Kanzashi’s face was expressionless as she coughed up pieces of her own wafer.

“You’re so funny, Ichika.”

“Really?”

“Yeah...”

My angel! My own angel, hath come down from heaven!

“I think you’re the first person I’ve met here who likes my jokes.”

“You’re glowing, Ichika.”

“Thanks so much, Kanzashi!” Reflexively, I hugged her around the shoulders.

“Hyaa!” She must have been surprised by the sudden contact, as her voice wavered while she tried to duck out of my arms. “No fair, Ichika...”

“Mm? Hmm. Sorry?”

“Why do you have to be so hesitant...”

Uhh, just because.

“Oh, and— Try this.” Kanzashi pulled a small jar out of her bag and showed it to me.

“What’s in there, jam? Honey, maybe?”

“It’s something I’m working on. Super Energy Gel #3, I call it the ‘Oomph Shot.’ You can see more about it on the web.”

She pulled up a projection display and opened up a page. Wow, she really did have a page made for it!

“Ring-ring-ring! Ring-ring-ring! It’s morning, morning, a bright new day. But you overslept! There’s no time for breakfast! Well, that’s okay, because you just need a spoonful of Sarashiki-brand Oomph Shot! Glug, glug! A full day’s worth of vitamins, amino acids, and calories! And it’s so tasty! Give it a try!”

The page had a video of Kanzashi putting on a one-woman puppet show. Her deadpan delivery almost made me crack up. And not in a good way.

“I’ve been working hard on this. I think I could sell the formula to a manufacturer.”

“I, uh, I see. I hope that works out for you.” I managed to not tell her that deleting the movie would improve her chances.

"Anyway, Ichika. Try it."

"Oh, sure." I opened the jar and looked at the glistening gel inside. I wasn't really sure about this. Nervously, I poked at the fluorescent pink candylike goop with a spoon and watched the tendrils which refused to snap as I lifted a bite up. *This takes a different kind of guts than Cecilia's!*

Stare. *Don't just stare at me silently! Staaaaaaare.*

"Here goes..."

Slurp... Glug.

"It's sweet! Really sweet!"

"It's important to get enough carbohydrates." I could feel the supersaturated sugar crystals coat my tongue.

"Yeah... This is a hella sweet idea."

"...Hahaha!" I was shivering at the overwhelming sweetness of it, but that was still enough to get Kanzashi to laugh. Only her smile made those 10 minutes feel like a respite.

"Hmm. Next is Laura, back on the yard." I ran there and met her, and Charl, as well. "Hmm? Why are both of you here?"

As I asked curiously, Laura elbowed Charl and replied, "Well, um. I thought that if I combined my time with Laura's, we could have twenty minutes."

That didn't seem like it fit the rules, but Charl's laugh was enough to pass it off.

"I will point out that it was Charlotte's idea. Not mine."

"C'mon, Laura! It was barely out of my mouth when you agreed to it!"

"Don't tell him that!"

"Plus, you didn't bring a real lunch, so you couldn't really do much by yourself anyway."

"Ugh..." Charl had her dead to rights, and she knew it.

"So what did you bring, Laura?"

"This!" She thrust out a vacuum-packed *something* at me.

"...What is it?"

"Rations! Proper Bundeswehr military rations!"

"Are those tasty?"

"The taste doesn't matter!" She was dodging the question.

"So they're not."

"Quit complaining! I had wanted to bring meat!"

"Meat?" Something was giving me a bad feeling about this. "What kind of meat?"

"Snake... meat..." Was I really going to have to eat snake meat on field day?

"It's nutritious!" Anyway, it seemed like she hadn't managed to make it. So she ended up with just rations, and Charl was honestly

helping her out here.

“And I made this.” Charl brought out a basket with an assortment of fruit in it.

“Ooh, apple rabbits.”

“And orange cats, and a blueberry pie.” I’d had my sugar needs not just squared away, but *cubed* away, but I still wasn’t about to pass this up. “And, here. I brought tea.”

She poured it from her bottle into a cup, and I took the cup and drank.

“Is this... Darjeeling? No, it’s close, but something else.”

Charl giggled, “It’s my own blend.”

She smiled. I smiled too. Watching us, Laura scowled, then mumbled, “Hmph. Why do I have to be left out...”

Laura was sulking. Thinking about how cute she was when she sulked, I gave her an apple rabbit.

“Huh?” Surprised by the suddenness, Laura’s cheeks flushed red.

“Haha. You’re cute, Laura.”

“Wh-Wh-What?!” I was getting back for Rin insisting on feeding me.

“Lucky you, Laura. Ichika, can you... Can you say that about me too?”

“Well, uh... It’s really embarrassing if you ask for it...”

“Huh...” Charl was dejected, and Laura was shyly blushing. And that’s how 20 relaxing minutes with them passed.

“Phew...” I let out a sigh of relief as lunch wrapped up.

“Hahaha, good work out there.” I felt a cold sports drink press into my cheek.

“That was exhausting.” I glared at the cause of my suffering, but Tatenashi pretended not to notice.

“You don’t have to say it out loud.”

“Fine, fine. Anyway, uh, Tatenashi?” There was something I wanted to ask her.

“What?”

“Did you get enough rest? Didn’t you get dragged off to do something?”

As I spoke, her expression changed to one of surprise, and she asked, “Wait, you saw that?”

“Yep.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice...”

“Eh?”

“Oh, nothing. Anyway, Ichika. Did you get enough to eat?” Now that she mentioned it, I hadn’t really had a meal. I must have been more worried about getting some rest than enough food in me.

“Well, I’m still a little hungry.”

"I figured you would be. Here." She held out a rice ball to me. It smelled like all the delights of fall. Chestnut, shiitake, oysters, carrot, burdock root, and konjac, with lightly caramelized soy sauce. It looked great.

"Want it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then, what should I have you do to earn it?" She gave me an impish wink, and I grinned back. That Tatenashi.

"Please?"

"Fine, fine. I'll give it to you." Huh. That was easier than I expected. Nonplussed, I looked into her face.

"Wh-What?"

"Are you sure there isn't some kind of catch?"

Thwap. Her fan caught me over the head.

"You're a rude one. If you're going to be like that, I'll take it back."

Munch, munch, munch! I stuffed it into my mouth before she could make good on her threat.

"Slow down! At least try to taste it."

"Mmf."

"Here's some tea."

Glug, glug. Ahhh! That really hit the spot! Grateful, I caught her hand.

"That was amazing!"

"Really? I'll have to make it again for you sometime."

"Thanks!" I nodded energetically as the bell began to chime. "We need to get going!"

With her hand still in mine, I set off.

"Ah..."

"Huh? What's up?"

"Oh, nothing..."

Tatenashi seemed nervous for some reason. I could feel her fidget and shiver.

"Do you have to pee or something?"

Smack! She slapped me across the cheek.



"That hurt..."

"You get what you deserve, Ichika."

The first event after lunch was the costume change race.

"What's this supposed to be, anyway?" I asked.

"Exactly what it's called?"

"Don't we have a board of ethics or something? How'd it get past them?"

"Why wouldn't it have?" Tatenashi raised an eyebrow.

"It's, uhh... Ugh, you know damn well why."

"Mm? Really? You're telling me you *don't* want to watch girls change?" Tatenashi gave me a cheeky grin, and snapped her fan open to reveal the word "lust." "Ichika, you pervert."

"I am not!"

"Oh, you're just a garden-variety creep then?"

"Doesn't that just mean the same thing?!"

Kaoruko had snuck up on us while we were going back and forth, and chimed in, "All right, that's enough of the old married couple act. Get back to announcing."

"Who are you calling a—"

"A married couple?!" For some reason, Tatenashi's face was bright red.

"Anyway, I'm going back to taking pictures! Ciao!"

"Hold it right there, Kaoruko!"

I jumped up to keep Tatenashi from chasing after her.

"C'mon, you can't leave me here alone! How am I gonna announce all by myself?"

"Hmph..."

I quickly slung my arms around her waist, and she glared down at my hands.

"So, how long are you going to keep touching me?"

"Oh, just, uhh..." I needed to think of an excuse, and fast. "Y-You have a really nice waist!"

Clang! The steel knuckles of an IS slammed into my face.

"Owwww!"

"Quit making a fool out of yourself and sit down!"

Rubbing the bruise that was beginning to form on my cheek, I took my seat and looked down at the field.

"You're so mean, President Tatenashi," I whimpered.

"It's your own fault for being so clingy!"

"You two sure I wasn't right?"

I glanced down at my mic and noticed it was switched on.

"Tee-hee." Kaoruko stuck out her tongue.

"Kaorukooooo!" Tatenashi was mad enough to bring out her whole IS, with its Vital Spiral gatling gun gripped in its right hand. "Stand still so I can hit you!"

"Whoa! Be careful with that thing!" Even as Kaoruko danced out of the way of the bullets, her shutter was snapping as it captured the perfect picture of an enraged Tatenashi. "Perfect! Keep that face!"

It was really something to watch, how she managed to keep out of the way while keeping her camera safe. I didn't expect her to be so nimble.

“Stop that, Sarashiki. You’re damaging school property.” Chifuyu smacked Tatenashi over the head. Hearing the effects of gatling gunfire described as damaging instead of destroying really reminded me that I was at IS Academy.

“But, Ms. Orimura!”

“Quit complaining.” Another smack finally shut her up.

“I’ll get you for this, Kaoruko...” The perfect line, and the perfect expression, for a villain. She was even chewing her thumbnail in rage.

“Tatenashi.”

“Grrrr... What?”

“That was perfect.”

“...Do you want me to hit you again?” Sorry, sorry. “Ahem. Anyway, let’s go to the costume change race!”

Her grip on her mic tightened. She was back in announcer mode, and even more hyped up than she’d been all day.

“Er... Anyway, this is Orimura Ichika!”

“And this is Sarashiki Tatenashi! Yay!” Tatenashi sprung into explaining the event. “First, each team will randomly draw an outfit to change into, and head to the changing zone to dress up! A teammate will help them change. Of course, you’ll only be able to watch from the shoulders up, but we’ve got lights set up to make sure you can get an idea of what happens behind the curtain!”

She was really getting into this, and the crowd was following along.

“Wait, what?! No one told me about that second part!”

“I have no intention of participating in something so insulting to a lady’s pride.”

“Not gonna happen!”

“That’s pretty embarrassing...”

“I’m out.”

Amidst the crowd of contestants dropping out, only Laura raised her hand. “I’ll do it.”

As the others turned to gape at her in surprise, Tatenashi continued, “Remember, first place in this event is worth 500 points!”

Enough to make everything they’d done so far irrelevant.

“Ugh, looks like I have to!”

“Hmph! I will not be defeated!”

“A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do!”

“If I have to do it, I’ll make it worth my while!”

“I’ll win.”

They may not have liked what they were about to do, but they sure weren’t gonna do it poorly.

Laura looked on with surprise and said, “Hmm. I’m impressed by your self-confidence.”

“Well of course I am!” Rin fired back.

“And now, each competitor will announce their assistant!”

At Tatenashi’s prompting, Houki spoke up, “My partner is Shijuuin Kagura. Another member of the kendo club. I’ve heard her family is of the old peerage.”

Shijuuin looked every inch the part of a proper Japanese noblewoman, certainly, and her gentle voice matched as well, “The past is the past. It’s an honor to have been chosen.”

She primly bowed her head, elegantly perfect down to the finest detail.

Next, it was Cecilia’s turn to introduce her partner.

“My own second will be Kagami Nagi, known for her speed. Her parents own a sushi restaurant. I’ve had the chance to visit, myself, and their egg custard is simply to die for.”

Kagami finally cut her off, “That’s long enough, Cecilia! You don’t need to tell them my whole life story! Ugh, this is so embarrassing...”

Cecilia did sneak in that she was on the track squad, though. So that’s why her legs were so toned.

“Okay, okay, my turn now! My roommate Tina Hamilton will be helping me out. Right, Tina?”

Next to Rin was a blonde girl whose gym clothes barely held in a super size bust. She stretched out her arms, and her breasts jiggled.

“C’mon, Rin. Can’t you come up with something better than that? You didn’t even say anything about me. Come to think of it, you’ve never introduced me to Ichika, either!”

“C’mon, Tina. It just hasn’t been the right time.”

“Okay, so when *will* it be?”

Their back-and-forth didn’t take anything away from their warmups, though. It seemed like they really were good friends.

“Um... I asked Tanimoto to help me out... Wait, what?!”

Where Tanimoto had been next to Charl, there was now just a scrap of paper.

“Um... ‘Sorry, Charlotte. I can’t do this. Don’t try to find me. I asked Kishihara to help you instead. Tanimoto Yuko.’ Wait, whaaaat?”

As Charl began to panic, a girl leapt onto her back.

“Hey-hey-hey! It’s Kishihara Riko, the girl you love to hate! Call me Rikorin!” While the entire crowd decided that was a pretty accurate description, Kishihara bunched up Charl’s shirt and inhaled deeply. “Sniff, sniff! Charlotte, your sweat smells great!”

“Eek! Hey, wait, stop— Ahhh!” It took Houki and Rin together to pull her off of Charl.

“I’m next, then.” Laura puffed out her chest. It wasn’t really smaller than Rin’s, but it definitely wasn’t bigger either, so I’m not sure why she was emphasizing it like that. “My partner’s figure is as

modest as her personality! It's Yatake Sayuka!"

With a blood vessel in her forehead nearly ready to burst, Yatake stepped forward, an arm over her breasts.

"You heard Laura's introduction, even if you probably don't believe she said it out loud. I'm so normal it's remarkable!"

The most remarkable thing about her was probably her willingness to say that about herself, but let's not dwell on it. Last but not least was Kanzashi with Miss Casual, a choice which was somewhere between "a given" and "obvious."

"Hey there! I'm Nohotoke Honne, age sixteen! My three sizes are ninety-one, fifty-seven, eighty—"

"Honne, let's not establish that as the baseline." Kanzashi, worried about her own figure, elbowed Miss Casual.

"Oof!" She hopped in surprise, sending her ample breasts—usually concealed under at least her uniform, if not her floofy pajamas—swinging.

"Uhh..." Not knowing quite where I should look, I snuck a peek over at Tatenashi.

"Mm? Where are you looking?"

"Oh, nowhere!"

"Mm-hmm. Hmm? Really?" I could feel her eyes drilling into me.

Before she could say any more, I dove back into announcing, "Anyway, here we go!"

At the sound of the starting pistol, 12 girls leapt into action. As I watched, I wondered why bloomers left the leg bare all the way up to the groin, and also where I should be looking.

"Aaaaand off to an early lead are Houki and Kagura!" Tatenashi's excitement was audible, and the change from her usual cool and collected style just made it even more contagious.

As I was thinking about that, Houki and her teammate reached the drawing box first.

"I drew Ling's clothes! It says... 'Cheongsam (mini).' What's the 'mini' part supposed to mean?!" Houki shot a disapproving glare at Rin, only to be met with a look of surprise.

"It means miniskirt, what else would it mean?"

"Don't act so blasé about it! I-If I wear that, they'll see everything!"

Rin tried to calm Houki down as she drew her own outfit.

"I drew Cecilia. It says... Huh? Just a dress?" She spread out the dress with a confused look on her face. It was a blue evening gown that would look great on Cecilia. The color was deep and vivid, with elegant lace trimming.

"Oh my, you're quite lucky to have drawn mine."

"How's that lucky? It's gonna be wicked tough to run in! It doesn't

fit me at all..."

"That's right, your chest— Ow!"

"Don't say that out loud!"

Cecilia rubbed the welt Rin's karate chop left on her forehead and drew her own outfit.

"Mine's... Oh? I seem to have drawn Houki." Opening up the bag it was in, she pulled out a red and white bundle of fabric—the clothing of a shrine maiden. "So this is sort of a Japanese nun's habit?"

"Kind of."

"It's a shame they didn't make it blue and white instead."

"What are you talking about?! Don't you understand anything about wabi-sabi?"

As they squabbled, Charl drew a slip of paper from the box.

"A uniform? This must be..."

"That's right. The uniform of the Schwarze Hasen. You must be glad you drew that, right?" Laura beamed with pride as Charl's eyes widened into saucers.

"I'm not sure if this will fit..."

I could almost hear the sound of something snapping.

"Charlotte, you've been a good friend. But now, you have to die."

"What?!"

"I won't forgive that."

Snapping her head to the side, Laura drew her own outfit.

"A princess knight? What's that? Princesses and knights are different things."

As Laura stared in confusion at the miniskirt-and-breastplate ensemble, Kanzashi's eyes lit up.

"A princess knight is almost like a valkyrie! Like Chifuyu nowadays, Brynhildr herself!"

"Wh-What?!"

"Gallant, graceful, beautiful, and invincible."

"I see! It's perfect for me, then! I'll wear it!"

Kanzashi did her best to keep up her smile as Laura nodded enthusiastically, then opened up the outfit she'd be wearing.

"Is this yours, Charlotte?"

"Yeah! It's my kitty pajamas."

"...Clever."

"Huh?"

"Clever. As I'd expect from a Frenchwoman. But maybe a bit too clever?"

"Huh?" Charl was visibly confused by Kanzashi's frustration.

Anyway, everyone had drawn what they were going to wear. Which left only the changing to be done...

"All right! Get behind the curtains, and get ready to strip!"

Tatenashi was really enjoying herself. What was I gonna do?



This is my chance to show Ichika I can look stunning in absolutely anything! Feast your eyes upon Cecilia Alcott as a shrine maiden! Cecilia nimbly dipped inside the curtain, and spread out the outfit she was to change into. But suddenly, just as she slipped her fingers under the waistband of her bloomers to pull them off, the shrine maiden's outfit was pulled back out and the curtain was raised.

".....?!"

"Hold on, Cecilia! Don't leave me behind! We're supposed to do this as a team." It was her partner, Kagami Nagi.

"I know, I know! Just let that back down!" Cecilia shouted as she embarrassedly pulled her bloomers back up.

"Sorry, sorry."

Cecilia had always thought that, although Nagi had always been friendly and helpful, she lacked a certain amount of feminine grace.

"Ahem. Now, if you could help me with this..."

"Okay!" Nagi began to pull Cecilia's clothes off. Her breasts bounced under her lacy bra.

"Eek! Nagi, have you gone mad?!"

"Huh? Aren't you in a hurry? Sarashiki's barely got anything to put on."

"That's not the problem! Nagi, do you have no shame?!"

"Aww..." Nagi momentarily made a shocked face. "Wait, did you think I actually meant that? Take it off, take it all off!"

"Eek! Ichika, save me!" Within the narrow confines of the curtain, the two struggled. The backlight made it very clear to everyone, including Ichika, what was going on.

"What the hell is Cecilia up to?" Ling sighed as if she had a headache. She was already down to her underwear and ready to go.

"Tina, do you know how to put on a dress?"

"Ling, do you know how to put on a dress?"

"**Huh?**" Ling and Tina looked up in unison.

"N-No way!" Ling shook her head from side to side.

"Really, you don't?"

"What're you so surprised about?! How often do we wear something like this, anyway?"

"You're no help at all, Tina!"

"What about you, Ling?! You're really gonna tell me you don't even know how to put a dress on?!" Even as they fought, they began to get a handle on what they needed to do.

"Okay, I need to get my torso in first... Tina, can you hold this up for me?"

“Okay, but you know the chest’s gonna fall straight down to your waist, right?”

“...Do you want to die?” As Ling’s eyes gleamed, Tina broke out in a cold sweat. While the odd couple squabbled, Houki tried to fit herself into the cheongsam.

“I can’t get my chest in...” Ling glared at her, but she paid no heed. The mini-cheongsam simply didn’t fit. Even the skirt part didn’t so much as hang low enough to cover her panties. And up top, it was impossible to button. “Am I going to have to run this half-naked?!”

“I certainly hope not.” Kaguya pulled as hard as she could, trying to stuff Houki into the dress.

“Ow, that hurts! I can’t breathe!”

“Try to live with it... Here goes.”

As she tried to get it up over Houki’s chest, the sound neither of them wanted to hear filled their ears. *Rrrrip*.

“What was that sound?”

“.....”

“Why aren’t you saying anything, Kagura?!”

“You’re going to have to run like this.”

“What?!” Kagura brusquely shoved Houki out of the curtain while she was still confused by her sudden insistence. “Hey! Hey, wait! They can see everything!”

“You’re just going to have to keep them covered yourself.”

Even as they argued, other teams were already starting the race.

“Ugh, whatever!” Houki set off at a run, not even caring anymore. But the faster she went, the more her hemline hiked up and her bustline was pushed down. “Ugh, this is so humiliating...”

She could hear the whistles and laughs, but the last thing she wanted to do was listen.

“The first obstacle is a vaulting horse! Do your best!” Tatenashi’s announcement rang out at the most accurate, and worst, of times. All of the obstacles were set up to show off as much as possible.

“Why do you have to be like this, Tatenashi?!” Houki’s hand holding her skirt down clenched into a fist as she glared viciously at the announcer’s stand. But as her eyes crossed with Ichika’s, all she could think of was covering up. “D-Don’t look, Ichika!”

He jerked his head to the side, pantomiming that he wasn’t, but that only irritated Houki even more.

“See you later, Houki!” Cecilia raced by her, preparing to leap. It was the first time she’d worn a shrine maiden’s outfit, but she wore it well. “I suppose this is what they mean by ‘the best of both worlds.’”

Cecilia arrogantly giggled as she braced to jump. But at that very moment, she planted her sandals directly on the hem of her hakama. She flew over the vaulting horse, leaving them behind, her curvaceous

butt and fancy designer panties gleaming in the sunlight.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”

“And there’s our first wardrobe malfunction! Good job, Cecilia! I can feel it deep in my soul—and if I was wearing as little as you are now, you’d be able to see that!” Cecilia shot the excited Tatenashi a cold glare, but everyone else was enjoying the view, even if they were all girls.

“That’s the stuff!”

“I knew the British cadet would put up a fight!”

“Cecilia’s just too...”

“Stupid sexy!”

With tears in her eyes, Cecilia tried to pull the hakama back up, but they were a borrowed pair. She had no idea how to tie them back up. *I... I need to do something to cover my behind!* Blushing all the way to her ears, she tugged the straps as tight as she could. Her decency restored, she started running again.

“Um, next is... A balance beam?” This time, it was Houki and Ling, along with Cecilia, who were under pressure.

To get by this, I...

I’m gonna need to spread my arms. And if I do...

They’ll see everything!

As all three stopped, grimacing, Charlotte blew by.

“Later!” Charlotte looked great in the dark German uniform. The cap, especially, suited her.

“What she said.” Kanzashi, never a very fast runner, had been bringing up the rear. But their pause let her claw her way back into second place. Her advantage was simple: how convenient her outfit was. There were absolutely no worries about it slipping off.

“This is good...” Not that she’d ever let it show. But it was good. “...Hahaha.”

Kanzashi was cracking up at her own joke. If nothing else, the two sisters shared a sense of humor.

“Ugh, they’re gonna beat us!”

“We simply have no choice!”

“No guts, no glory!”

Houki, Cecilia, and Ling abandoned their worried about their clothes and clambered up on the balance beam. Their clothes were about to fall off. The whistling was reaching a fever pitch, and their faces were bright red. But at this point, they didn’t care anymore.

“I need to win this!”

Victory or death. An emotion the three shared.

“At this point...”

“Embarrassment...”

“Doesn’t even matter!”

Casting modesty—and the scraps of cloth which provided it—to the wind, they advanced along the balance beam. But just as they felt the relief of commitment, a different wind blew by them.

“.....?!”

It was the wake of a girl in black plate and a pink battle bikini—
Laura.

“Hahahaha! With an IS, this is like nothing!”

The sudden screech of a whistle filled the air.

“Laura is disqualified!”

A red card. Instant ejection. Not that she didn’t deserve it. But Laura couldn’t hold back her frustration.

“*Verpiss dich!* You make me dress up like this, and then disqualify me?! I’ll blow you all away!” The dull click of Laura’s revolver cannon echoed through the field as she fixed her aim. Her embarrassment had driven her mad. “Raus hierrrrr!”

Boom! Just as Laura was about to fire, a supersonic shot struck her cannon.

“Wh—?!”

“Now, now, Bodewig. We aren’t forgetting the rules, are we?” The calm, soft voice was Ms. Yamada’s, and the shot was from the IS Rafale Revive. IS Academy teachers earned their pay.

“Mein Liebe!” Laura was swallowed in an explosion, leaving behind only a villain’s dying scream.

And thus concluded the costume change race. In the end, there was no winner.



“Um...”

The wind rushed by me. It felt different from normal.

“So, Ichika, how’s the view from fifty meters?” Tatenashi asked over an open channel.

“Um. Could you explain what’s going on?” I’d drifted off after eating a snack bun she’d brought me, and when I came to I was floating at the peak of IS Academy’s Central Tower, suspended from a bundle of balloons. “What the hell is this supposed to be?!”

“A balloon fight, duh.”

“Don’t make faces at me like you’re surprised I’m asking! What do you mean “fight?” When? Where? Between who?!” My shouts were carried off by the wind. What even was this? What was going on?!

“What a silly question, Ichika!” Houki’s Akatsubaki soared into the air, twin blades drawn.

“Right here, right now!” Cecilia’s Blue Tears aimed its sniper rifle.

“We’re gonna settle this for good!” Rin’s Shenlong switched into combat mode as she brandished her scimitar.

“Ichika, you know French girls don’t take ‘no’ for an answer, right?” Charlotte pumped her shotgun as her Rafale Revive Custom II’s loadout materialized.

“You’re mine now!” Laura’s Schwarzer Regen wrapped around her, a replacement revolver cannon mounted.

“I won’t lose.” Kanzashi’s Uchigane Nishiki danced through the air, missiles armed and ready to launch.

All six IS were hovering around me in a circle. *What the hell are they gonna do?!* It looked like they were all aiming at me. Were they going to kill me? Was this my time? What the hell!

“I can’t die yet— Byakushiki!”

“...Huh?” I couldn’t hide my look of shock at not being able to sense any response from Byakushiki.

“Ichikaaaa, we kinda pulled the plug on that.” Tatenashi waved up from ground level. I could feel an evil eye boring into my soul. As I watched, still in shock, the six surrounding me readied their weapons.

“Prepare yourself, Ichika!”

“Your head is mine!”

“It’s time to pay the piper!”

“Ichika. Remember, it matters not how a man lived, but how he dies.”

“You’re my bride!”

“Ichika, you’re mine...”

All I could do was let out a strained laugh. Meanwhile, Tatenashi continued her explanation, “And in the final competition, the balloon fight, all six team leaders will be popping the balloons which hold Ichika up while battling to be the one to catch him when he falls! The winner of this round gets a hundred million points!”

100,000,000 points... What even was the point of the other rounds, then?

“Are you sure you’re not confusing this with the ball pop from before?!”

“C’monnnnn. Who cares about the details? Don’t you have any appreciation for the finer things in life?”

I, uh. I thought maybe I’d appreciate them more from ground level.

“Aaaaand... Begin!”

“Wa—” My scream was drowned out by the roar of Charl’s shotgun.

Pah! Pah! Pah! A line of balloons popped around me.

“Whoa!” I suddenly dipped toward the ground. “I’m gonna die! You’re gonna kill me! If I fall that fast I’m definitely gonna die!”

Houki’s katana whipped through the air, taking out a balloon that was right beside my head.

“Chestoooooooooooo!”

I was barely spared an impromptu haircut, but many more of the balloons holding me up weren’t so lucky.

“Look, Ichika! Have you ever seen Houki smile like that?”

“Out of my way, Houki! Impact cannon, fire!”

I really wouldn’t mind if you sat this one out, Ri—

Blam! Blam! Blam! Three shots rang out, popping a swath of balloons and sending me plunging even lower.

“Whooooa!” Crap, crap, crap! I was actually gonna die!

“Don’t worry. You won’t die.” As I looked up in confusion, I felt Kanzashi’s arms wrap around me from behind. “If I reach the ground with you... I win.”

Kanzashi grinned at me, and I couldn’t help but grin back.

“Let go of my bride!” Plasma daggers extended, Laura darted in.

“You missed.”

Slip.

“Eh...?” Kanzashi, did you just drop me? You just dropped me, didn’t you. “Whooooa!”

Just the shock of being shoved away popped even more balloons. The ground was rising up fast. Just as I’d resigned myself to death, the brilliant orange wings of Charl’s Rafale Revive Custom II filled my vision.

“Ichika, I’ll protect you.”

She was an angel. Catch Omamori☆Charlotte, Wednesday nights at— Okay, yeah, I was so stressed out that my mind was going. I needed to get a hold of myself.

“Uh... Charlotte? Umm...”

“Mm? What, Ichika?”

“Umm, uh...”

“Being pressed up against you like this is...” Charl’s face was right in front of mine. I could feel her curves pushing into me, and I didn’t know what to do.

“Ichika, you’re so close...”

“Sorry.”

Looking at each other, our gazes met, and reflexively, we pulled away from each other.

“Ah.”

Well, well, now I’d really done it.

“I’m gonna dieeeeeeeeeee!” As I dropped, a streak of blue light broke my fall.

“I won’t let go of you, Ichika.”

“Cecilia... You saved me...”

As she proudly wrapped herself around me, Cecilia turned to face the other IS. Four bits flew snapped out from her blue wings.

“Go forth, my bits!”

She’d come a long way from when we’d fought, and now she could fly while controlling her bits. Gently, we drifted down toward the ground.

“Coming in for a landing, Ichika. Hold on tight.”

“Got it.” Her sweet smell made my heart race. Not from perfume, just from a woman’s pheromones. Yes, very much a woman. *Ugh, my head is swimming...* No! I couldn’t! “Sorry, Cecilia!”

I slipped out of her arms and leapt into the air.

“Ichika?! What on Earth are you—”

“Don’t worry, Cecilia! If I catch that tree, I should make it with just broken bones!” Or so I thought, but the tree was a long, long ten meters away.

Pick one of the three following choices:

1: My friends will come save me.

2: I suddenly think of a solution.

3: I won’t be able to do anything. Reality is cruel.

“One or two, what’s it gonna be!”

Burn, my Cosmo!

Welp, it was gonna be three.

“This is too cruel!” As I screamed, Houki focused and raced toward me as fast as she could, but it was too late. The girls had been so busy fighting among themselves that they’d drawn away from me. “So this is it, huh.”

Just when I gave up, I heard someone shout my name. The next thing I knew, Tatenashi was cradling me a hair’s breadth above the ground.

“Are you okay?!”

“Yeah... You saved me...”

As I answered, she sighed in deep, deep relief. *I’ve never seen that serious of a look on her face.* In any case, we settled gently to earth.

“And the winner of this event is Tatenashi!” While I’d been distracted, Ms. Yamada, in bloomers herself, had taken the announcer’s stand, and she smiled down at us.

“Eh...?” Everyone had a shocked look on their face. Including Tatenashi.

“Rules are rules.”

“Wait, uh, how’s that going to work? She’s not even in the same year.”

“You’re right, she isn’t. What are we going to do about that? But in any case, she won this round, meaning...” As Tatenashi’s IS dematerialized, Ms. Yamada took Tatenashi’s hand and raised it in the air. “The winner is... Sarashiki Tatenashi!”

“That’s absurd!”

“Indeed!”

“There’s no way I’ll let that happen!”

“That’s no fair, Ms. Yamada!”

“Ichika should be with me!”

“That’s cheating, Tatenashi.”

The protests of the six were answered with smacks from Chifuyu,
“Quit your bitching. Field Day is over! Get to cleaning up!”

“No way...” they sighed in unison.

I felt someone’s gaze on me, and glanced up to notice Tatenashi
peeking at me hesitantly.

“Tatenashi?”

“W-What?”

“Do you have to pee or something?”

Smack! Field Day ended with a slap.

Chapter IV: It's Fantastic! A Maiden's Secrets are Top Secret

"Sigh..." The day after Field Day was a Friday off due to the holiday on the weekend, and all Tatenashi had the energy to do that afternoon was slouch around her room. Laying in bed with a hand over her face, she stared up at the lights on the ceiling from between her fingers.

The IS Mysterious Lady's repair was complete. A shipment of spare parts had arrived from Russia, along with a number of new packages. Installation, tuning, and compilation. Those had taken up her whole morning. But that wasn't what Tatenashi was sighing about.

What am I gonna do? The problem was what had happened during Field Day. She'd had absolutely no intention of getting involved in the final competition. That, at least, was the truth. And she'd done her best to stay out of it. But when Ichika was in danger, her instincts won the argument. Her body moved as if it'd been made for that moment.

This is such a mess... She'd promised that the winner would be moved into Ichika's class, and even that meant pulling a lot of strings. But even worse... *Maybe I wanted that to happen...* To be in the same class as Ichika. To spend more time with him.

"Sigh..."

The more she thought about it, the harder her heart throbbed. Just as she decided to put it out of her mind and got up out of bed, though, an unexpected knock sounded on her door.

"Hello?" she called out weakly. The voice which answered shattered whatever focus she had left.

"It's me, Orimura Ichika. Do you have a minute?"

Her heart pounded hard enough to leap out of her chest.

"H-Hold on a sec!"

She looked down at what she was wearing, and realizing it was only a blouse and panties, frantically tried to pull on a skirt at the same time as she cleaned up the piles of dirty laundry lying around. Sometimes being lucky enough to have a single dorm wasn't very lucky at all.

"Ah, darn!" She was in such a hurry that she'd gotten her buttons in the wrong holes, and her chest kept getting in the way as she tried to fix them. *Dammit! I can't just let him get bored and leave!* Hurriedly finishing, she opened her door.

"Hey. Did I wake you up or something?"

Well, this was definitely Ichika. And she certainly didn't have any problem with him deciding to visit. But she wanted to get him inside before any of the other girls realized he was there. "Come on in! I'll put on some tea."

"Huh? But—"

"C'mon, c'mon!"

She gave him a quick push, half-forcing him into her room. Even so casual of a touch made her pulse race. A strangely relieving wave of frustration washed over her. *Ugh, my heart is beating so fast...* Fast enough to make her chest hurt. The sweet suffering threatened to overwhelm her. *Stay calm, stay calm. Just get a hold of yourself. You'll be fine.*

"Um, Tatenashi? I think you dropped these." Looking a bit embarrassed, Ichika held out a piece of the aforementioned dirty laundry—and, of course, it had to be panties.

"Eeeek! Give me those!" She snatched the lingerie from Ichika's hand and, blushing, crammed it into her skirt pocket. *He... He saw... He saw my panties...* Even if she'd deliberately showed him them before, this was the first time he'd seen them without her planning it. Even if they hadn't been dirty, she would have been embarrassed. A maiden's heart is a delicate thing.

"Ichika! Take responsibility!"

"Responsibility? For what?"

"I... I mean, ummmmm..." Tatenashi couldn't quite make herself say the words. *There... There's no way I could say that out loud! Nothing like that, or like that...* As lurid images spun through her mind, she twisted her index fingers together.

Probingly, Ichika leaned in close and said, "What's wrong? Do you have a fever?"

He was close enough for her to feel his breath as he laid a palm on her forehead.

"Eep!"

"You don't feel like you have a fever. Are you just worn out from yesterday?"

"N-N-N-No way! I haven't missed a beat!"

Even Ichika could easily see through her false courage.

"If that's true, then how come you dropped your panties?"

"You idiot! Ichika, you pervert!" Just having her mind brought back to it made Tatenashi blush. Peeking around a girl's room isn't a very nice thing to do. Perhaps the measure of a man is his willingness to feign ignorance of what he finds. "Why, Ichika! I'd hoped you were a gentleman."

"I know, I know. But you're quite the lady, Tatenashi. Quite the mysterious lady, I might add."

Even though she knew he was really talking about her IS, she didn't mind hearing those words out of his mouth. *Actually, that reminds me...* She remembered asking him to call her by her real name when they were alone.

"C'mon, Ichika—"

"Katana."

Her heart skipped a beat.

"I know it's not the recognition you deserve, but why don't we go out somewhere?"

In her eyes, he absolutely oozed with charm at that moment. Catching hold of herself, Tatenashi—Katana—gulped and nodded.

"Sure."

"Is there somewhere you wanted to go?"

"How about—"



"So you want to have dinner at the Grand Imperial Hotel?" Ichika examined the invitation ticket Tatenashi had passed to him as he walked through the covered shopping plaza.

"Mm..." Tatenashi answered faintly from beside him, her cheeks a pale red.

"It's still daytime, though."

"Mm..."

"...Can't you say anything else?"

"Mm... Ah?!" As she walked along next to Ichika, Tatenashi was lost in thought. But she couldn't waste what little alone time she got with her crush like that. Shaking her head, she tried to focus. "Um, Ichika? We're already downtown, right?"

"Yeah."

"So why not do some shopping?" Ideally for a ring. For her finger. The kind priced at three months' salary. "Let's go, Ichika."

"Okay, but where?"

With another "mm," Tatenashi held out her hand.

"Mm!"

"Oh, did you want to hold hands?"

"Would you rather I slapped you with it?"

"...Understood, milady." With a patronizing bow, Ichika took Tatenashi's hand. As soon as their fingers clasped, Tatenashi gripped hard and took off at a jog.

"All right, Ichika! Let's go!"

"Wha?! Hey, slow down!"

"Ahaha!" Ichika sighed in exasperation. "Let's do some shopping, and stop for a snack, and then... Hmm, there was an earring I wanted to take a look at."

“That’s a pretty hard day.”

“Would you prefer Lunatic instead?” Tatenashi let out a deranged giggle.

Sensing how much trouble he was in, Ichika nervously began to speak. “Uhh, how about Normal? Or maybe even Easy.”

Tatenashi dragged him along, her enthusiasm to go everywhere and see everything overflowing.

“Aren’t you a bit old for that?”

“...Be gentle. Please.” Ichika gingerly chose his words, remembering how his own sister always seemed to get the Last Word. Seeing his hesitation, Tatenashi grinned in an inscrutable way somewhere in between amused, kindly, and impish. Anyone watching would have assumed they were already lovers, but neither could realize it.

“How about this one?” Tatenashi held up a short winter coat with fur trimming.

“I can’t tell if it’s supposed to be warm or lightweight.”

“Well, it’d certainly be easy to move around in. I’m not sure I’d bring it to Russia, though.”

Ichika remembered that Tatenashi, free as an IS pilot to choose a country, was a Russian pilot. Not a cadet.

“It must get pretty cold in Russia,” he replied.

“Yeah, but the springs and summers are pretty nice in some places.”

“Huh.” The image of Tatenashi in a long fur coat and fur hat came to Ichika’s mind, and suddenly, he was very interested in talking about Russia. “Why don’t you take me sometime?”

She tensed up, and could only manage “Eh?” as a response.

“To Russia. I want to see it.”

“O-Okay. Someday. Someday!”

Her eyes glimmered as she clutched the coat, and Ichika raised an eyebrow. *Hmm, Russia sounds like an interesting place.*

Meanwhile, Tatenashi—*A vacation with just the two of us! I can’t wait!* She was extremely pleased. The shoppers passing by as they walked on, watching them, couldn’t help but think ‘What a cute couple!’

“Ah!” Tatenashi suddenly noticed that they were near an arcade. “Hey, look, Ichika!”

“Huh?”

“Wanna go there?”

“‘There,’ meaning...?” He followed the aim of her finger. “Isn’t that just a normal arcade?”

Lately, they’d been rebranding as “amusement centers” and the like, but Ichika was still old-school.

“C’mon, it’ll be fun. Let’s go!”

“Okay!”

Having completely lost interest in the coat, Tatenashi shoved it at the clerk and skipped out of the shop.

“Tatenashi! Look out!”

She was about to run across the street, oblivious to the oncoming truck. Without a moment’s thought, Ichika dove after her, wrapping his arms around her to keep her safe.

“Ah...”

“C’mon, Tatenashi. Pay more attention.”

“Okay... Sorry...”

Tatenashi was beside herself with the thought that Ichika could hear her heart pounding. *He’s so muscular...* How long had he been holding her? She wanted it to last forever, if it could. Feeling his warmth, smelling his scent, closer than anyone else. *I must be glowing right now...* Her heart ached. But the pain was so, so sweet.

“Okay, red light. We can go now.”

“Ah...” Tatenashi let out a sorrowful sigh as Ichika released her. “We could’ve spent a little longer...”

“Huh?”

“Ahem. Nothing. Anyway, Ichika. Let’s play that zombie game!”

“Oh, you’re into lightguns? I figured you’d be all about IS sims. Those are big now.”

“It gets boring winning all the time. Anyway, zombies, zombies!”

“Okay, okay.” Ichika took Tatenashi’s hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and let her lead him on. She could barely hold her heart in.

“This one’s one of the new ones with wireless guns, so no worries about getting tangled up.” That, at least, was a wonderful new innovation.

“All right, let’s do it!”

Ichika resigned himself to a quick loss as he watched her excitement. But Tatenashi fed three tokens to the four-player machine, and took up a gun in each hand.

“Check out my gun kata!” She crossed the guns in front of her chest as the game started. And somehow, she was untouchable.

“Holy shit, look at her go.”

“Has she even been hit yet? The zombies aren’t getting anywhere close!”

“We got an esports pro here, boys!”

The shocked murmurs spread through the arcade. As a crowd gathered, Tatenashi finished the final boss off without a scratch.

“Well, that was no big deal.” Spinning her guns, she struck a pose. A photo finish for sure.

“Oh wow! That’s Orimura Ichika!”

“Holy shit, you’re right! But who’s the girl?”

“That’s why she looked familiar! That’s Sarashiki Tatenashi, she was in the September issue of *IS Model Shot!*” The murmurs grew to a dull roar as all eyes were on the duo.

“C-Could you autograph this?”

“Can I get a picture with you, Ichika?”

“Give me your number, I’ll give you mine!”

A crowd of amazed onlookers pressed in.

“Tatenashi.”

“Mm?”

“Let’s get out of here!”

“Got it!”

Tatenashi’s mood only improved as she and Ichika made their escape. If only they could make it all the way to the end of the world together.



“Ahh, that was fun.” After their time at the arcade, Tatenashi had dragged Ichika around shopping, and now the sun was setting. Suddenly, the IS Mysterious Lady picked up an encrypted transmission.

“Hello? Yes. Yes. I see. I’ll be right there.” There was nothing left of the playful girl who’d just been standing next to Ichika. Now, there was only secret agent Sarashiki Tatenashi.

“Um, Tatenashi?” Seeing how serious she suddenly looked, Ichika hesitated before opening his mouth.

“Sorry, Ichika! Something really important just came up. Can we call it a day?”

As Tatenashi tried to pass it off, Ichika looked her straight in the eye and said, “Let me come along.”

“Eh?”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but it doesn’t seem like something you should have to take on alone.”

Tatenashi could normally obfuscate her way out of situations like this, but something in his eyes this time made her nod in acceptance.

“Then... Okay. Thank you.”

“Of course!”

And that’s how Tatenashi and Ichika ended up on a sneaking mission.

“All right, then. Let’s get going.” Tatenashi, and Ichika beside her, were in their IS Academy uniforms. They were at the seaside park near IS Academy. The kind of place with a lot of shady rumors attached.

“So... We’re going dressed like this?” Ichika asked hesitantly. He’d come expecting to set out fully-armed, and this was almost disappointing.

“Yeah? I mean, it’s definitely more convenient.”

“Okay...”

“Plus, we won’t need weapons on this mission anyway. It’ll be fine.”

Her cheerful wink was answered with a solemn gaze. *If things go wrong, I’m going to have to protect her...* His concentration was snapped by a tap on the forehead with one of Tatenashi’s fans.

“C’mon, kid. Don’t get yourself all worked up. Relax, relax!”

“But...”

“Worst-case scenario, you get in your IS and get out of there. Understood?”

The sudden serious tone confused Ichika. He couldn’t figure out whether to calm down like he was told or get even more worried, and as he wavered between the two, he began to slump.

“Where are we going, anyway?” In response, Tatenashi grinned and pointed out toward the swelling waves. “To... The sea?”

Tatenashi nodded and spoke again, “There’s an off-the-books American carrier anchored a few dozen kilometers out. That’s where we’re going.”

She presented this matter-of-factly, but for Ichika it was a shock. Not trusting his own ears, he asked again, “H-Hold on! An American carrier? Are we trying to cause an international incident?!”

“Meh. That’s why I was saying, if things go wrong, these uniforms’ll come in handy.”

IS Academy was independent of any nation, organization, or faith. Meaning, no matter what happened, the diplomatic blowback would be limited. Plus, Tatenashi was the student council president. As long as she could at least manage to talk Ichika’s way out of a sticky situation, everything would be fine.

This is pretty risky, though. After all, he was the only male in the world who could pilot an IS. Every country in the world would kill to get their hands on him as a test subject. *If worst comes to worst, maybe my Russian citizenship will come in handy.* It was for times such as these that she’d embraced a reputation as a turncoat.

Tatenashi—“Shieldless”—originally, the name for unyielding armor. For unyielding will to defend, even without a shield to rely on. When Katana took that name, she swore to take on its meaning as well. To protect her family, her homeland, her comrades. That was the duty of Tatenashi, head of the Sarashiki family.

And sometimes, the best defense is a good offense. The Americans had information on Phantom Task that they were keeping close to their

chest. That meant she had to act, or the name Sarashiki Tatenashi would mean nothing.

“Ichika, are you wearing your IS suit under your uniform?”

“Yeah, just like you told me.”

“Perfect. Let’s go.” As Tatenashi spoke, she hopped over the fence surrounding the park. Ichika followed, then stopped to focus and open his IS.

“Hold it.” Tatenashi slapped him on the cheek with a fan.

“What’d you do that for?”

“I should ask you the same thing. If you take that thing out here, we’ll be surrounded by Japanese and American squads before we even reach the water.”

Use of IS off school grounds was prohibited by the Alaska Treaty.

“Then what do we do?”

“We do this!” Grabbing Ichika’s arm, Tatenashi leapt into the air. They soared, for a moment, then—with a resounding *splash!*—broke the water.

“Glub!”

“All right, let’s get swimming!” Tatenashi, her IS suit beginning to turn transparent in the water, looked like a swimsuit model.

“What?! We’re swimming that far?!”

“Yeah.”

Even Ichika hadn’t expected anything like that.

“If you don’t like it, you can always go home.”

He immediately fired back, “No, I’m in for this. I’d never be able to stop worrying if you were out fighting alone.”

Maybe love could bloom on the battlefield. —Just kidding.

“...Ichika.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not jet-skiing.”

“Huh?”

“So try not to be a drag.”

Badum-tsh.



“All right. We’re making good progress,” Tatenashi nonchalantly intoned as she shook the water from her hair. The two had successfully boarded the carrier and made their way to the ship’s galley.

“Ahh, hold up... Let me catch... My breath...” Meanwhile, Ichika was gasping for air.

“Is that all you have in you? All we’ve done is go for a quick swim and then climb aboard.”

“All we’ve done? Really?” Ichika panted.

“C’mon. Snake has to do this pretty much every time.”

“Are video game characters really a good example?” Plus, Ichika was always more a James Bond fan, anyway.

“Listen. Sneaking missions may sound boring, but they’re pretty hard, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, you don’t have to tell me that.”

Tatenashi rolled her eyes as Ichika continued to pant, “Get a hold of yourself, kid.”

She spanked his butt.

“Wait... Just... Just let me catch my breath...”

“I’ll leave you behind.”

“Wait... It... It’s dangerous here... Don’t leave me...” This was an American carrier, so who knows what might happen? An ex-SEAL cook? An exploding microwave? It was certainly nowhere to hang around waiting.

“Now that I think of it, something’s not right.” They hadn’t encountered a single person yet. *Is this really good luck, or...* Really bad luck. Definitely really bad luck.

“I’m starving! Make me something, will ya— Huh?” The person who announced her entry to the galley with a brusque demand for dinner was none other than that American IS pilot, Iris Calling. She was wearing a full-body IS suit which looked almost like a wetsuit.



Dammit! While Tatenashi dove for cover, Ichika stood out in the open.

“Who the hell are you?” Iris had grown her hair out recently, a choice which was appreciated—though they’d never admit it out loud—by the other sailors aboard. His mind focused on that pointless fact, Ichika stuttered an obvious lie, “I’m the new cook.”

“Oh, I see.” Iris slapped her hands together, as if everything made sense now. “...Like hell you are, Orimura Ichika!”

A knife flew by his face, scoring a line along his cheek. A beat later, blood welled up and out of it.

“Ahaha...” Ichika’s face was known around the world. Not a single IS program had avoided covering him at least once. If anything, it would be strange for a pilot *not* to be recognized on sight.

“What are you doing here?! This isn’t even a normal ship, it’s an Erased secret mission... I’ll bet there’s someone else here with you.” Ichika’s heart skipped a beat. “And if I had to guess, it’d be... Sarashiki Tatenashi, wouldn’t it? No way, it’d be Orimura Chifuyu.”

Smacking her right fist into her left palm, Iris loomed over Ichika. He looked over to Tatenashi for help, and—

“Wait, what?!”

She was already gone.

All that remained was a fan lying on the floor, reading “good luck!” in thick, bold letters.

“No fair!”

“What the hell are you going on about, Orimura?!” Dash, jump, and stride. Closing the gap in an instant, Iris unflinchingly pulled out a pair of pistols and fired.

“Whoa! I’m gonna die! You’re gonna kill me!” Leaping backwards, Ichika managed to barely avoid the shots, but he still didn’t want to go straight to the last resort of using his IS. Meaning, his only option was the ultimate attack Chifuyu had taught him herself.

“I didn’t want to have to use this, but...”

“Huh?”

Ichika’s breaths grew shallower. Noticing his change, Iris cautiously backed off.

“My ultimate attack... RUN AWAY!” Turning his back on Iris, Ichika fled.

“Hold it right there, moron! Natasha promised to make my week if I caught you! Are you listening, you idiot?!” Chased by yells almost as angry as Rin’s, Ichika ran through the ship’s passageways. He ran. And ran. Then ran some more.

I can hide in that compartment! Narrowly dodging a hail of fire from behind, he leaps, slamming the hatch behind him and locking it.

“Phew. I can catch my breath in here.”

He turned in relief... And Iris stood before him.

“Good, good. Worn yourself out yet?”

“What the hell’s good about this?!” Ichika wanted to scream.

“Are you ready?” Glimmers of light swarmed around Iris, and soon, the IS Fang Quake clanged to the deck. “I should warn you, I’m more into older guys.”

Meaning, she had no intention of holding back.

“Dammit! If I have to—” Ichika opened Byakushiki. In the narrow confines of the compartment, two IS smashed together with twin Ignition Boosts.

“Not bad, for a kid!”

“You’re not gonna overpower me!”

Right hand grasping the other’s left, left hand grasped in the other’s right, they grappled. Shoving with all their might, neither gave an inch.

“I’ll smash you into the wall!”

“Not if I do first!”

Again, simultaneously, they fired off Ignition Boosts, pushing their leg thrusters to the limit as well. Their armor creaked as it pressed together.

“Get—”

“—Outta here!”

As the fight heated up, they slammed their heads together viciously.

“Eat dirt, Orimura!” Gaining the upper hand for a moment with a Revolving Ignition Boost, Iris swiftly inverted Fang Quake. Directly over Ichika.

“Wha—”

“Got you!”

Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Roars filled his ears as she fired off another Revolving Ignition Boost.

“Gwah!” Ichika, nearly at his limits, was pushed to his knees. With a satisfied grin, Iris... Flew off. Under her own power. By her own will. Toward the wall.

“...Eh?”

With an almighty, wrenching crash, she tore through. As Ichika watched in silence, another hole blew open in the wall next to the first as Iris returned.

“Gah?!”

“You’re not getting away!”

Again, the sounds of steel on steel, composite on composite, echoed through the ship’s passageways.



Listening to the booming explosions from far away, Tatenashi's expression twisted into a confused scowl.

"They're making that much of a scene, and still no reinforcements? Something's not right here."

As she trode the cold steel of the deck, she thought to herself. Iris Calling's presence... Must have been a coincidence. It wasn't just possible, but likely, that she really had encountered them in the galley by chance while looking for rations.

This ship is dead in the water... And someone had done it. No, not just "someone." She knew who.

"Phantom Task... I knew it! They've already made their move!"

Remembering the layout of the ship she'd committed to memory, Tatenashi made her way toward the CVIC, ready for combat at any moment.

It's even creepier for the lights to be on with no one here than if they were off... Her thermal sensors revealed no signs of life.

"It's unlikely that they've killed the crew. They'd gain nothing from that. They have to be locked up somewhere. Meaning..."

Meaning, this had to be a trap.

"I've got to hurry." Just as she lengthened her stride, an uncanny whistling rose, then fell deep, and her jaw clenched.

[Alert. The emergency scuttle system will now activate. All hands, prepare to abandon ship. Do not provide. Repeat. All hands, prepare—]

Gah! Is this some kind of bad joke?! Covert mission or no, this was still an American carrier. If it went down, anti-terrorism squads would be swarming like wasps. And the "Phantom" in Phantom Task may as well referred to their habit of coming and going like ghosts.

Could they... What if they had some sort of deal with the Americans? Or wait, what if their *existence* was the result of some sort of deal with the Americans? "Well, this has gone from bad to worse."

Tatenashi bit her lip, imagining the worst. Why would an American carrier on a covert mission have data on Squall Meusel, leader of Phantom Task's "Monochrome Avatar" direct action cell? As she realized she may have made a fatal oversight, the color drained from Tatenashi's face.

"I need to hurry."

Throwing caution to the wind, she ran through the twisting passageways of cold steel. Most unnerving at all was that she encountered no resistance on the way there. *I need to get that info!* Quickly hacking the computers, she opened up a display.

Search: Squall Meusel.

.....

.....

.....No records found.

“Impossible!” Even as a look of shock rose to her face, Tatenashi thought of another option, “Search casualties list.”

It was by no means unusual for special forces operatives to be dead on paper. But something wasn’t right.

“There she is.” Why was Squall listed as an American KIA? “Hold on... Squall Meusel was...”

Killed 12 years ago. Not as a cover story. For real. What was going on here? The photos from the autopsy were dated 12 years ago, too.

“But she looks so young... That must mean...” Tatenashi was so focused on the images that she didn’t even notice the ball of flame bobbing behind her.

“—?!”

Wracked with a sudden premonition, Tatenashi spun around—to only to be swallowed by an explosion.



“Hahaha...” Squall looked down at the sinking carrier sink from the pitch-black skies. She looked almost angelic as her blonde locks waved over the gleaming armor of her IS Golden Dawn. “And that should put an end to that. Goodbye, Sarashiki Tatenashi.”

Just as Squall turned to leave, the point of a lance caught her.

“You’re not getting away this time, Squall Meusel!” Tatenashi, her IS Mysterious Lady fully deployed, was on the attack. The time for worrying about diplomatic blowback was over. Tatenashi’s instincts screamed that Squall was too dangerous to be allowed to live.

“Haaaa!”

Squall watched the incoming hail of super-pressurized water with a bored expression.

“Don’t waste your time. That IS could never take down my Golden Dawn.”

Looking closer, Tatenashi could see a faint web of heat rays around the Golden Dawn.

“Little squirts like that will never break through my barrier of flame, Prominence Coat. And—” Squall stretched out a hand toward Tatenashi. As Tatenashi watched, sparks condensed in Squall’s palm into a sphere of flame. “Mysterious Lady’s Aqua Veil can’t hold against my Solid Flare.”

The ball of flame shot forth as she finished speaking, piercing Tatenashi’s own barrier and scoring a direct hit on her armor. Somehow, the life support systems held together, but her shield energy was already drained.

“Ugh...!”

“And what will I hear next? ‘I won’t lose?’ or ‘I won’t let you get away?’ I’m not sloppy enough to lose to tough talk.”

Tatenashi fled, looking to put distance between herself and Squall, but a barrage of Solid Flares pursued, their bursts lighting up the night sky. *If I just keep running, she's going to get me eventually!* Turning and swiping one away with her Azure Gyre gatling lance, Tatenashi tried to use the explosion to propel herself toward Squall.

With thrusters at full power and Ignition Boost firing, she closed the distance in an instant. But Golden Dawn, as if waiting, spread the tip of its gigantic tail open, wrapping around Tatenashi's armor like a venus flytrap.

"Ugh...!" Her chest caught in the machine's grip, a look of panic entirely unlike Tatenashi set in on her face. Meanwhile, Squall languidly contemplated her prey.

"Just what has gotten into you? Ohh, I see. Orimura Ichika must be on that ship. Then—" Squall raised both hands over her head. "I wonder what would happen if I sunk it straight away? Ahahaha."

A huge ball of flame began to form between her palms. Realizing that a direct hit of it would send the carrier straight to the ocean floor, Tatenashi screamed involuntarily, "Stop! I won't let you do that!"

The jaws of the gigantic mouth clutching Tatenashi's torso creaked as she began to force them apart. But—

"Too late!" With a gleeful shout, Squall released the orb of fire.

"GRAAAAAHH!" With a clang, Tatenashi tore the jaws surrounding herself open, but before she could disentangle herself, Squall's blast exploded.

"Such a pity."

"Ah... Ahhhh..."

But then—

"Are you okay?! Tatenashi!" Rising through the smoke was Kanzashi, her Fudouzan "Unmovable Mountain" shield package fully deployed. Somehow, it had endured the blast.

"Kanzashi?! What are you doing here?!"

"I heard! About your determination... About what your name truly means..."

Tatenashi knew who from as soon as the words entered her ears. *That old fool... Jeez...* The old man's cheeky grin rose up in her mind.

"I don't want to just be protected anymore! I want to protect someone else! I want to protect you! I want to protect everyone!" Kanzashi's eyes gleamed with determination, shorn of all doubt. Short of all reason to be doubted. "Here!"

This was the true potential of the Haute Couture packages for personalized IS. Its name, "Beautiful Krasnaya." Wings of a deep crimson red spread, swooping to settle on Tatenashi's back. As it latched on, her Aqua Veil, too, turned red, proof that it had switched to high-output mode.

I accept. Your hopes. This duty. This power!

“And I’ll show you! My determination... My One-Off Ability!”

Tatenashi’s warcry sent a shiver down Squall’s spine. They were still at a distance, yet, brushing on her fingertips—

“.....?” Something was wrong. If anything was there, it would be on her sensors. Yet nothing was. She checked again with her eyes. Still nothing. *What? What’s going on? This feels... Wrong...* It was Squall’s turn to show uncharacteristic panic.

“Take this! My One-Off Ability! Sökkvabekkr!”

Squall gulped. She’d heard that name before. Sökkvabekkr, abode of the Norse goddess Sága, second wife of Odin. Meaning—

“I’m sinking?! Golden Dawn is sinking?!”

“Yes. This is Sökkvabekkr. A wide-area stasis field.”

Its power to grasp was far beyond even Laura’s Active Inertial Canceler. A perfect barrier inescapable and unavoidable, swallowing all around it.

“Ugh! And you’re trying to put out my flame—”

“Bingo! And just how long do you think you have left?” Relishing her revenge, Tatenashi grinned languidly while lifting Mistilteinn.

“How much energy do you *have*?!” Squall struggled against the field, trying to free herself. Unseen waters had already swallowed her to her waist, disabling her leg thrusters.

“You know, someone here had the *perfect* thing to say in a situation like this. What was it, now?” Tatenashi tapped her chin with a finger, then, as Mistilteinn finished charging, leveled its point at Squall. “Ahh, right. *Too late!*”

Tatenashi mouthed the words with every bit of glee that Squall had earlier, then burst forth in a breakneck charge.

“I... I’m losing? No! It’s not over yet!” Squall raised her right hand at Tatenashi as she swooped closer, rapidly forming another ball of flame.

“Is that all you’ve got?!” Tatenashi charged, unflinchingly, only increasing in speed until she became one with her lance.

“Pfft.” Just as she was about to be run through, Squall turned her own attack on herself.

“Wh—?! ”

The full brunt of the strongest fireball she could muster blew Squall away. She had escaped the barrier, but not without cost. Sparking wires dangled from where her left arm had been.

“Looks like my little secret is out.” A smile drifted to her face.

“So you *are* a cyborg.” Tatenashi mentally underlined her earlier speculation. But in the confusion, Squall was able to slip away. Mysterious Lady lacked the energy to pursue.

“We’ll have to continue this another day, Miss Student Council

President!" She fired off one last burst to cover her escape.

"Tatenashi!" Kanzashi barely blocked Squall's final attack.

"Thank you, Kanza..." Tatenashi slumped over, at the end of her strength. Kanzashi held her upright. "You've gotten so strong, Kanzashi."

"Don't worry about that. Just rest."

"Don't mind if I do. The rest is up to you..."

Tatenashi passed out.



"That's what I'm tellin' ya! Your Ignition Boosts are all over the place!"

"Like you've got room to talk, Iris. I'm not the one who flew myself into a wall."

"Look at the brass balls on this kid."

"Owwww! Okay! Okay, you're right!"

Tatenashi opened her eyes to the sound of a lively argument. She was lying on a bench in the seaside park, her head resting in Kanzashi's lap.

"Kanzashi..."

"Tatenashi! You're awake now?"

"Listen, I know this is rude to ask, but..." She lifted a wavering finger, and pointed it at Ichika. "Can you swap out with him?"

Tatenashi winked at Kanzashi, who let out a suffering sigh.

"Well, if you've recovered enough to joke around like that, you should be fine."

"Haha..." Tatenashi didn't add that she wasn't joking, but did seize on the idea, imagining what Ichika's lap would feel like. *Not bad, not bad at all.* Absorbed in thought, she didn't notice Ichika approaching. And for some reason, Iris was with him. She wasn't quite sure how they had come to terms after their fight, but alas.

"Ichika." She was suddenly worried that they'd miss their dinner date.

"Yeah?"

"Um... Well..." Reading the room, Kanzashi got up and left, motioning Iris away with her. It was night, in a park, looking out at the sea. The perfect situation to tell him how she really felt. "Umm..."

"Oh, if it's about dinner, we're already too late." Tatenashi slumped back down. All the tension which had just been swelling in her chest faded at the sight of Ichika's innocent grin. *Well, no sense crying over spilt milk.* She nodded, coming to see it as a chance to at least show her maturity.

"Let's head home, then."

"Wait, Tatenashi! I know a good place around here. Let's go

there.”

“Eh?!” Her heart leapt again at the unexpected invitation. *Where’s he going to take me? At this time of night, it would have to be a bar, or even...* Her head filled with images too hot for an all-ages book, Tatenashi grasped Ichika’s hand. “Yeah, let’s go!”

“O-Okay!”

“So this is the place?”

“Yes!” It was a ramen cart parked under a rail overpass.

Disappointed, Tatenashi let out a deep, deep sigh, “Ichika, are you like this with everyone?”

“Huh? No, this is my secret, I’ve only ever told the guys about it.”

“That wasn’t what I meant, I meant...” Tatenashi stewed, not quite finding the right words. Suddenly, she broke into laughter. “Ahahah. You’re the first boy who’s ever taken me out for ramen from a cart, that’s for sure.”

Tatenashi—Katana—was, after all, the eldest of the Sarashiki girls. She’d been invited out by men before, but it had always been to stultifyingly dreary gourmet restaurants.

“Looks like there are open seats, let’s duck in.”

“Open seats?” It was deserted. Tatenashi was beginning to have second thoughts about this.

“Hey!” As they ducked under the noren, a toned middle-aged man with a stubbly beard yelped under his breath, recognizing his customer, and excitedly tossed the newspaper he’d been reading aside.

“Well if it ain’t Number One,” He sighed, as if he’d been hoping for a bigger group. It seemed like the chef—if you could call him that, this being a one-man cart—knew Ichika.

“C’mon, Burai, quit calling me that.”

“Haah? What’s wrong with Number One? Sounds pretty cool to me.”

“Yeah, whatever.” They must have been fairly close, as Ichika had dropped all formality. “C’mon, Tatenashi, sit down.”

She glanced around nervously, with no idea about how to deal with the wooden bench.

“Am I supposed to step over it?”

“Nah, just walk around from the side. Yeah, like that.”

“Hey-hey, Number One! Looks like you finally got yourself a chick!”

Tatenashi was flustered for a moment at being referred to as a “chick,” but soon, the realization that the man recognized her and Ichika as a couple brought a blush to her face.

“Nah, man. She’s the student council president at IS Academy.” She was a bit frustrated at the matter-of-fact introduction, but as the more mature one of the two tried to hold it in.

“You sure? Seems like she’s got different ideas.”

“Wha? No, no, it’s nothing like that!” Her knowing grin, though, said something entirely different.

“Ya know. Maybe it’s about time you got outta Chi’s hair.” Burai stroked his stubble, smirking. “And then maybe I’d have a shot.”

“Ahahah. No way.” There wasn’t even a hint of laughter in Ichika’s eyes.

“Y-Yeah, I guess. Anyway, two bowls for Number One!” Slightly rattled, Burai turned back and began to boil some noodles. Ichika took a cup from the shelf and placed it in front of Tatenashi.

“What’s this for?”

“Huh? Water, what else?”

Tatenashi was surprised by the water being self-service, but fascinated at experiencing so many new things. She stared around like a kid at an amusement park.

“Ichika, you said you’ve never been here with a girl, but surely you’ve brought Rin at some point?”

“No, umm...” Ichika hemmed and hawed around the awkwardness of boys and girls in middle school. The reason seemed to be that they each needed space, but the particulars were something only they could know.

“I see. Well, I guess that’s fine.” Grasping on this newly-exposed weak point, her confidence began to return. Meanwhile, Ichika was having a harder and harder time opening up in front of Burai.

“So, Number One, d’you talk that way at school too?”

“No wayyyy! It’s just, y’know, she’s here, so...”

“Mm-hmmmmmm.” Grinning, Burai drained the noodles and ladled broth into a pair of bowls, then, with all the showmanship of a professional, piled the remaining toppings on in a flash. “Here ya go!”

As he set the bowls down in front of them with a weighty *thunk*, Ichika broke out into a grin.

“Looks great.”

“C’mon, Number One! Get it right!”

Ichika clapped his hands together, playing along with the act. “It doesn’t look great—”

“It is great!”

They leaned in for a quick high-five. As Tatenashi watched the interplay between the men, she felt like, just in this moment, she could just be Katana. *He’s trying so hard to act big, but he’s still a little boy.*

As she contemplated her picture of Ichika, she again gazed into her bowl. The crystal-clear golden broth, the hand-cut noodles, the giant slabs of pork belly chashu that girls avoided while boys ordered extra of. A mountain of leeks cut on the diagonal, and a

mouthwateringly-runny soft-boiled egg. But what whetted her appetite most of all was the aroma. The rich scent of the pork, the sharp notes of the soy sauce in the broth. The pungent notes of the garlic.

Complex yet forceful, intense yet delicate. It reminded her of herself.

“Dig in!”

“Here’s your chopsticks, Tatenashi.”

“*Katana.*”

“...All right, Katana.”

“Hmph... Good enough.” She wasn’t a huge fan of his hesitance, but she was supposed to be the more mature one here, so there was no point in needling him about it. Nodding, she picked up her chopsticks.

“Better eat before it gets cold!” At Burai’s prodding, she began to daintily pick at her noodles. But something about how she was eating didn’t seem to please him. “C’mon, hon, ramen ain’t something you eat to look good doing it! Put yer back into it!”

At Burai’s insistence, she slurped as hard as she could.

“Wow, this is great! It’s even better than before!” As he watched the twinkle in Katana’s eyes, Burai rubbed his face as if to emphasize that he’d just pointed out the obvious.

“All right, I should get going on mine too!”

Slurp. Sluuuurp. Slurp. The sounds echoed in the tiny nook. Burai smiled in satisfaction as the two focused on their meals.

“This is delicious! Ichika, could you refill my water?” Katana’s inhibitions were completely broken down. Finishing her pork, she drained the last of the broth from her bowl.

By coincidence, Ichika had finished at the same time, and their calls of ‘**That was great!**’ echoed in unison.

“Cleaned your plate, huh, hon? Ichika, you gonna let a catch like this get away?”

“I told you—” Katana grinned triumphantly as Ichika nervously chuckled. “I told you, it isn’t like that...”

“Oh? Not even just for tonight?”

“C’mon, Number One, pick up the pace!”

Outnumbered, Ichika waved the white flag.

“Fine, whatever! She’s my girlfriend!”

Burai and Katana leaned close, grinning to each other.

“Did you remember to record that?”

“You know I did,” they whispered to each other, outside of Ichika’s hearing.

“Anyway, Burai, that was good stuff! Here’s a thou’ for the two of us!” Ichika rose as if to flee, Burai and Katana laughing merrily at his discomfiture.

“Thanks! See ya later, Number One!”

“Well, if I’m your girlfriend, we have to walk home arm-in-arm,

right?”

“...Jeez, haven’t I had enough for one day?”



“Wait, you mean you really wanted to?”

“I sure do! That was a bit of a workout, I deserve to treat myself.” Really, it was more than just a bit of one, but not talking about just how hard she’d struggled was part of Tatenashi’s strength. With a tender grin, she snapped open a fan reading “invincible.”

“Jeez, you don’t have to pretend like that was no big deal.” Suddenly, Ichika snapped her up in a princess carry.

Tatenashi’s mouth flapped open and shut like a goldfish’s, “Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!”

“I heard from Kanzashi about you taking on Squall all alone. You must be exhausted.”

“I-I’m fine!”

“I know, I know. Get some rest, Katana.”

Entranced by the sweet nothings flowing from Ichika’s lips, Tatenashi relaxed into his arms. And exhausted to her very limits, she rested her head on his chest to sleep.

“Just this once, Ichika.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He realized that she really had been pretending it was fine as he heard her breathing steady. Holding Tatenashi gently to avoid waking her up, Ichika walked back to IS Academy.

So much happened today... He’d never expected to run into Iris, but the encounter had taught him a lot about the proper use of Ignition Boost. *So you can use that rapid-fire... I’ve gotta learn how!* Filled with a newfound determination, Ichika passed through the gate of IS Academy.

“**YOU’RE LATE!**” Dread weighed upon him at the sudden shouts.

“What were you doing out this late— Wait, what?!”

“Ichika, you creep! What did you do to Tatenashi?!”

“Why, Ichika! What’s the meaning of this?”

“E-Explain yourself, Ichika!”

“Mission accepted... Moving to eliminate target.”

He trembled at the combined assault of Houki, Ling, Cecilia, Charlotte, and Laura.

“W-Wait! I can explain!” he blurted out. As all five approached, a fan struck them each on the forehead.

“Ah?!”

“Eep!”

“I—”

“Oh...”

“Ugh.”

Tatenashi had awakened sometime during this, and smiled as she opened the fan dangling from her fingertips.

“There, there. That’s more like it~♪”

A voice spoke from within the fan, *[She’s my girlfriend!]*

The writing on the fan read “it’s official.”

“So, now that we’ve made that clear... See you tomorrow, Ichika.”

Hopping out of Ichika’s arms, Tatenashi quickly made her way back to her dorm.

“I... chi... ka...!”

All that was left was the bloodshed. Ah, fate! How cruel, how cruel.

Epilogue: Like a Lover, Like a Virgin! To Call as if In Love, to Answer as if In Love

“Phew. Jeez...” Squall lay on the cold floor of a Phantom Task safe house, sparks occasionally flying from the stump of her left arm. She wanted it repaired immediately, but the downside of being a cyborg was how hard it was to recover from injuries.

“I want to go find a new arm, but... Look at me.” She chuckled bitterly, looking down at her tattered dress. “Looks like using Squall’s name as cover backfired. What do you think, Autumn?”

Autumn quietly stepped out of the darkness. How long had she been waiting?

“Tell me what you think.” She pointed her damaged limbs in Autumn’s direction. “You must be disappointed in me.”

Silently, Autumn strode to Squall’s side, and tenderly stroked her wounds.

“I already knew.”

“Oh? I’m impressed.” Squall let out a surprised, girlish giggle, with more than a little bit of self-deprecation mixed in.

“Don’t push yourself so hard. You may be made of steel, but you can still feel pain.” Squall’s eyes widened. “I’ll make her pay for this. You just get some rest.” Autumn’s words were filled with concern for her lover. Squall wanted nothing more in that moment to be babied, but she pushed Autumn away.

“...It’s a bit out of our way, but let’s go get parts. We can pick up our new weapons, too.”

“Yes. Let’s.” Nodding, Autumn sat down next to Squall.

Squall was silent.

Autumn was silent.

“Hey.” The long, long silence was broken by Squall. “Kiss me.”

“Yeah.”

The two nestled together in a long, romantic kiss.





“Ufufu.” Tatenashi lay sprawled across her bed, playing the recording for what must have been the hundredth time.

[She’s my girlfriend!] It was Ichika’s voice. Ichika’s voice, saying everything she’d ever wanted to hear.

She giggled, and as the recording played again, she looked even more satisfied with herself. Soon enough, she was rolling back and forth on her bed with a blush, going “Ohh, this is too much!” Like a kid thinking about their first crush.

“Whoops, I played it again.” The cycle repeated over and over, late into the night. “Mm! I just thought of something!” Her mind whirling as if it were racing through the stars, she snapped upright and picked up her phone.

“Ms. Orimura? It’s me, Sarashiki Tatenashi. I’ve come up with a solution to that problem we have...”

Tatenashi grinned just imagining the look which would be on Ichika’s face.



“And so... Oh, hey, Ichika.”

“H-Hey, Ichika.”

The next Monday morning, Ling and Kanzashi were in class 1-A homeroom.

“Ms. Yamada. Explain.”

“Yes. The Principal has decided to move all of the first-years with personal IS into the same class as a result of the events of Field Day.”

“Now of course, this means class-versus-class tournaments are canceled, but don’t worry. We’ve got some special training lined up for you to compensate.” Chifuyu had expected a room full of gloomy reactions—but the cadets were more worried about how Ling had ended up next to Ichika.

“Ling, how on Earth were you able to choose your own seat?”

“Permission to sit next to my bride!”

“Who taught you to be so clingy?”

“Teacher! I’d like to change seats!”

As the uproar spread, Chifuyu let out a deep sigh and began cracking heads.

“Well, well. Looks like this is going to be our strongest class ever. And the one that causes the most problems.”



“It’s done!” Tabane had transformed the penthouse suite Squall had booked into a laboratory, and wrapped an arm around Madoka as she crowed. Catching Madoka’s reflexive knife thrust between two fingers, she snapped the blade in half.

“You’re so adorable, Madoka!”

“Stop it... Anyway, is my IS done?”

Tabane had begun treating the gloomy Madoka like she was another Chifuyu.

“Of course it is! Behold! Darkness to blot out the light! I call it...” She swept the curtain covering the IS to the side. “Kurokishi! Your own IS!”

“So... This is mine?” Its jet-black armor glimmered menacingly. “With this... With this, I can finally surpass my sister!”

“Hold on, hold on. There’s no point in rushing things. Everything needs to happen in the proper order!” Tabane leaned in close and looked Madoka in the eye.

“Then, my first target is—”

“Orimura Ichika, of course!”



Afterword: “All right, now that that’s done with.”

Hey, it’s Yumizuru. Volume 9 is finally done. I didn’t even realize I was writing a battle until it was halfway over. Guess you really do need some fighting to spice things up. Next volume, we get to see Madoka’s new IS. I hadn’t really been planning on it, but now that I went with giving Squall and Autumn upgrades, looks like CHOCO’s gonna have a busy month. Heheheh.

By the way, thanks for bringing me to Taiwan and Thailand last year. Thanks to all my overseas fans! Thanks so much!

Anyway, now that I’m done writing, let’s talk about games! *Monster Hunter Frontier G* is getting an IS event! I’m in *Monster Hunter* now! Capcom’s *Monster Hunter*! I feel like I’ve finally made it. I’ve been playing *MonHun* all the way through to endgame since the very first one, so no way am I gonna miss this. I’m so hyped for it I bought the *Fate* DLC just to celebrate. All right! I’ve always been a Capcom fan, so really, guys, I’m not gonna be complaining if you decide the time is right for *IS Basara*. And speaking of games, I came up with the subtitle and basic outline for the one from MAGES. It was fun to be back in the games business! I’m thrilled that it seemed to sell pretty well.

Thanks to all the staff on the anime, too! Season 2 turned out great. This time, I was also the lead writer, so I ended up having to push up work on volume 10 a bit. Meaning, it wasn’t like I was chomping at the bit to take over that job. I kind of had my own personal scheduling hell having to go over each episode’s script too. Ahahah.

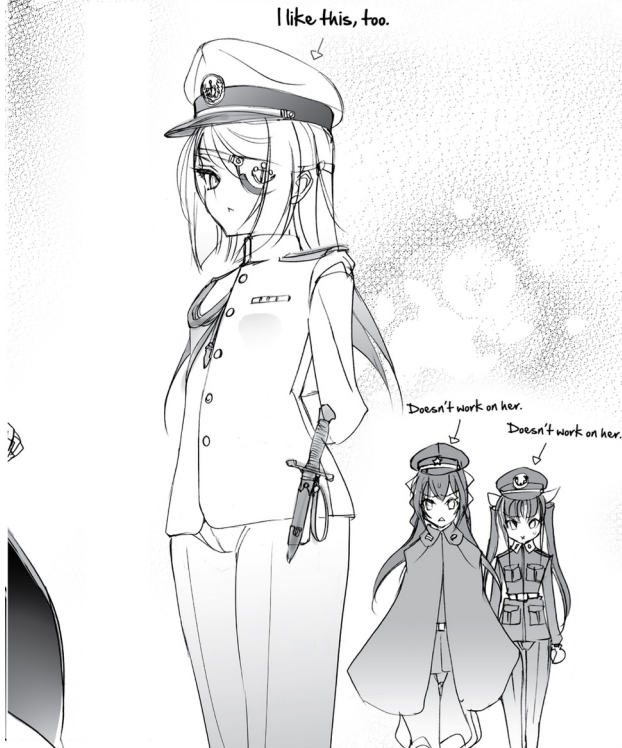
In volume 10, the Phantom Task plot is going to heat up. I wish they had more members. That’s kind of why the three we’ve seen were revealed to just be the Monochrome Avatar cell. But each cell operates independently, so don’t expect them teaming up or anything. Anyway, though, that’s something to leave for next volume.

Anyway. Oh, right. I want to escape overseas. I should move my money to a Swiss account (kidding). I’d like to go back to Taiwan and Thailand. See America and Europe too. You know where I’d love to go? Germany. I want to eat some authentic guten morgen. Anyway, see you!

— Izuru Yumizuru,
February xth

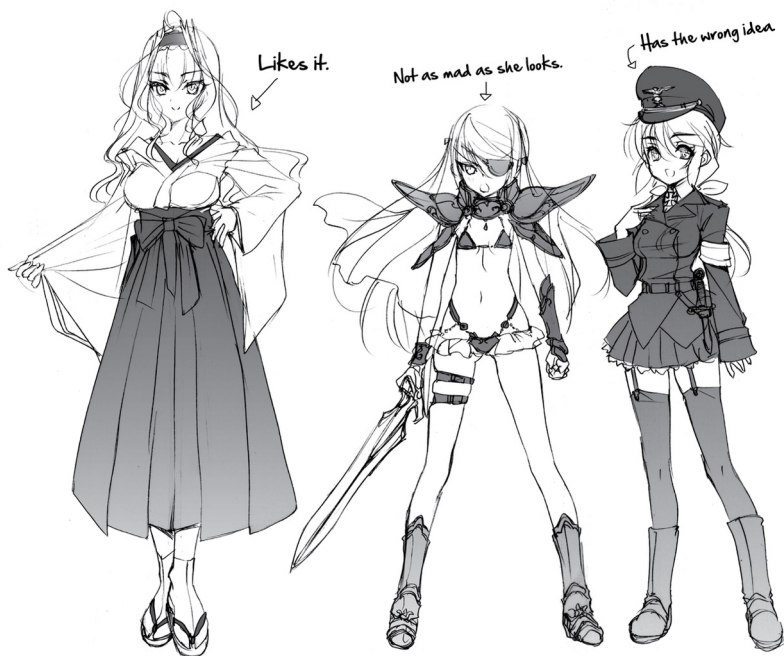


Subject Celebration of Vol. 9 Release	Date : Almost time for school entrance ceremonies!
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword	Time : 4 A.M.
 CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI http://chocolateshop-float.com	



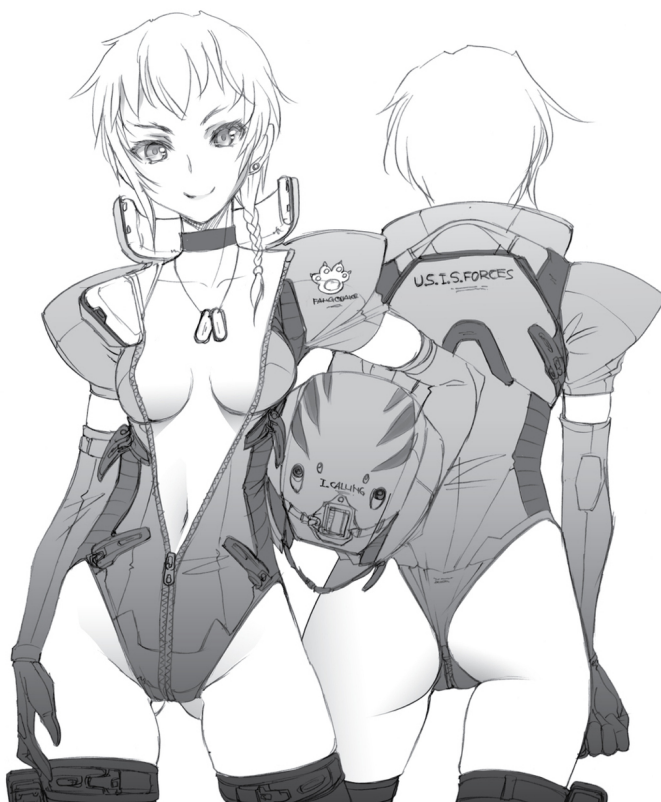


Subject Big Grats for the Vol. 9 Release	Date : Finally don't need to run the heater.
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword	Time : 5 A.M.
 CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI http://chocolateshop-float.com	





Subject Hip hip hooray for Vol. 9!	Date : A year after my second daughter's birth.
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword	Time : 6 A.M.
 CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI http://chocolateshop-float.com	



Iris Calling

Firm, toned butt.

"Daddy, wake up!"

"Da-da!"

Daddy was up until the sun rose drawing again, can't he sleep a little longer?

My oldest daughter starts preschool in April, so it looks like that isn't going to be an option...

This spring, my oldest will be four, and my second daughter will be one.

Yep, the little girl who was being born while I was grinding away at volume 8 is going to be one, so it'll also be my first anniversary on this project! To celebrate, I did extra afterword pages.

In the past year, my little girl's gone from a tiny newborn to beginning to walk on her own two feet.

Also, I've gone from drawing washboards to drawing boobs which some people even think are TOO big.

Actually, for volume 9, even more than boobs it's been bloomers. I should count up just how many I've drawn and see if that book of world records has a category for 'Most bloomers drawn in a light novel.' But first I've gotta change my youngest's diapers and put her bloomers on.



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Infinite Stratos: Volume 9
by Izuru Yumizuru

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Original Japanese edition published in 2014 by OVERLAP, Inc.
This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2019

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